

FLAMES *of the* BLUE RIDGE



BY ETHEL and JAMES DORRANCE

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FLAMES OF THE BLUE RIDGE



"Oh, it ain't money that can buy this—it's a promise!"
she exclaimed.

FLAMES OF THE BLUE RIDGE

BY
ETHEL AND JAMES DORRANCE

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THE MACAULAY COMPANY

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TO THE MEMORY OF
PAT
THIS BOOK IS FONDLY INSCRIBED.

As a third collaborator, he attended upon the writing of the story with unflagging optimism and helped to light the way to THE END with those flames of dog devotion that burn steadiest and bluest in the white bull-terrier heart.

ETHEL AND JAMES.

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FLAMES OF THE BLUE RIDGE

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CHAPTER I

RED

THE driver had announced their approach to Dismal Gap. The front axle had broken, the ancient stage had tipped, the horses had tried to bolt.

Calvin Parker, with baggage and other miscellany, felt the hurl of his rapid descent into a new life. There was a ditch; there was much mud, oozy mud; there was somebody tugging at his collar. He had a feeling of resentment; then sank into oblivion.

Later, he became convinced that he still was alive. The situation was too utterly mundane to hope otherwise. He seemed to be lying on a bank beside the road. That officious somebody must have dragged him there. Had it been the driver?

Vaguely he began to remember certain ministrations to his face and manipulation of his ears which raised a doubt.

An initiatory muscular test aroused in him the ambition to sit up. This fulfilled, he glanced around. So vociferously engaged was the jehu of the hills in untangling his pair of splotch-freckled grays from

the snarled harness, so regardless was he of how his quondam passenger fared that it scarcely could have been he.

Parker enlarged the scope of his vision.

Nearby stood a small white mule, gazing at him with ears wagging and an expression of amusement on his elongated face. The mule was all white except his legs—they were red to a point above the knees. This detail made Parker recall what he already had noticed, that the oozy mud of the ditch, of that fast drying in the noonday heat on his clothes, of that sticking to the straight-depending forelock of his hair, was red, an insistent, metallic red.

The mule irritated Parker. Why should he stand there grinning when his own four legs were stained with the mud? And who was he to grin, anyhow, bridled in servitude, cinched tight around the belly from the saddle on his back?

Clutching the horn of the saddle was a brown hand, with long, strong fingers. The hand it was that caused Parker to lift his gaze and see, just behind and above the mule, another amused face gazing down at him—the face of a tall girl in a short-skirted garment of coarse material that looked to be homespun.

Irritated by a new perception, Parker clapped a gloved hand over his eyes. The hair of the girl, showing beneath the sweep of her felt hat, was also red.

Red! Was everything still to be red?

"I—you—we——"

He muttered the assorted pronouns by way of trying his voice, his gloved hand still comforting his eyelids.

"Right smart of a spill, wasn't it?"

At her voice, nicely modulated, he removed his hand and looked at her again. She had come around the mule, was approaching him. And, as she came, he felt comforted.

On consideration, her hair shouldn't be called red. No hair growing from human scalp was really red, as other things were accounted red. The fellow who had started the fad of calling it so must have been color-blind, for the same shades, if reproduced in fabric or squeezed from a tube, would be golden-brown, burnt umber, sienna, mahogany, copper—what not. This girl's hair was marvelous, but not red. And the grin on her face, too, had toned down.

The long line of born-and-bred Parkers back of him began to urge that, if possible, he achieve his feet. He took a brief satisfaction in his success, then added a step or two to meet her.

"You pulled me out of the mud?" he asked in a sagging voice.

She looked put to it to maintain her toned-down expression, but answered as if excusing a liberty.

"Man, you were hurting for it—you were plumb bogged!"

After peeling off his right glove, he substantiated that uneasy memory of ministrations to his countenance.

"It was you, then, that washed my face?"

"Hope I didn't bother you none. When we-uns scour, we scour severe."

"And my ears—you dug them out?"

"You can hear, can't you?"

Those other Parkers nudged this last of them to thank her, but she either did not expect it or did

not want it. She had turned the white mule, was about to mount.

At the moment the stage driver, who seemed to have conquered the refractoriness of both team and harness—at any rate, had hitched the horses to a wheel—came toward the lesser, or human element in the accidental equation.

“’Lo, Verney! How be you-all to-day?” His greeting preceded him.

“Tolerable, Tobe Riker.”

There was snap in her reply and the fact that she did not spare him so much as a glance.

“And you-all’s folks, how be they?” he persisted.

“Tolerable.”

Her foot found the stirrup. An upward swing, which disclosed a stretch of leg, white-cotton-clad and of excellent outline, placed her in the saddle. With a nod in the direction of the stranger whom she had unbogged, but never a lift of the eyelids toward the little whip, she scraped the ribs of her mount with both heels.

“Hi there—you ain’t no call to get riled!” Undismayed, Tobe Riker went padding toward her. “I’m a-wanting to ask after your pappy. Still trying to light his mortal path with them hellish blue flames of his’n, is he now?”

Displeasure brightened the tan of the girl’s cheeks as, for the first time, she looked squarely at him. Her voice nipped the air in reply.

“If he finds them, I reckon you’d be the likeliest stick hereabouts to feed them with. At any rate”—she consulted the sun-clock with an upward glance—“I’ve no spare time for your dry crackles to-day; I’ve got a meetin’ to keep.”

She flipped the reins, again reminded the hybrid in the region of his ribs, laughed mockingly, and was off. Up the road twinkled the beast's red shanks, glinted the sun on her hair.

"Her reg'lar meetin' for two, I 'spect!" Thus the driver, with marked vindictiveness. "I hope she's late. It sure would disgust Rex Currie some to hear the reason why!"

"And who may our good Samaritan be?" Parker inquired, by way of recalling him from the state of rage or enthrallment in which he stood, gazing and muttering.

"Who is—who? Rex Currie? That's something you-all are due to find out, stranger, if you try setting up to Verney Metcalf. Eh? Look yer, if it's onto her you be splicing that Scripture name, you're offen the road bad as yon stage-coach. That girl ain't no comfort to nobody, as I can see. Least-wise, she acts mighty ornery."

"You seemed to make her angry." Parker spoke disagreeably; he felt disagreeable. "I wanted to thank her for dragging me out of the ditch; was about to do so when you broke in and drove her off."

"'Twa'n't such a trick she done you. I was aiming to yank you out myself, once I got that glib team back on the road."

Parker, glancing down at his clothes, then into the sea of mud from which the driver had intended to extricate him, *after* due attention to the harness and the splotch-flecked grays, was able to restrain any expression of gratitude.

But Tobe Riker noticed no lack. "Can't see how she has any part to be putting on with me, nohow,"

he was grumbling. "I reckon it's just that she imitates her dad. Oh, not in looks so much as——"

"I didn't catch the young lady's name," Parker interrupted.

"Metcalf. There's a whole cantankerous family of them."

"I mean her first name."

"Verney we-all call her from the first half of the heathen handle they struck onto her, offen a mountain in these parts. Vernaluska Metcalf—that's the whole of what she's suffering under. Scant wonder she favors a wasp mor'n she does a human-being woman."

Apparently cheered by having found excuse for her who had stung his pride, the driver withdrew his gaze from up the road and surveyed his more immediate plight.

"Sorry I spilled you, stranger, but I'll help you tote your duds into town. It won't discommode me none, for I got to enlist a hand to help set up the coach. It ain't such a powerful distance, at that."

Omitting to incriminate himself as overwhelmed by this mercy, Parker selected the lighter of his bags and started along the comparatively dry path which paralleled the oozy road. He heard Tobe Riker, more heavily laden, pad-padding behind him.

By the next conversational overture he appreciated that the native had deciphered the inscription painted on the rear end of the suit-case he carried.

"C. A. P. is a right peart set of initials," chuckled the whip. "Be you a cap set for the women-critters, now? Or do them letters stand for night-cap?"

On intercepting the frown curved over-shoulder at him, Tobe curbed his facetiousness, if not his curiosity

"New York, eh? You be a furriner, right enough. How came you-all from such an out-of-the-way place as New York to Dismal Gap?"

A bend in the road brought the two into the only street of the village. Parker set down his burden with frank relief and gazed about. His eyes, keen to colors, noticed the pink of the landscape's peach blossoms, its white of plum, its spring-green of tree and shrub; they lifted from the red and ocher earth at his feet to the cerulean panoply overhead; they marked the buildings which flanked either side of the street, not so much for their frame structure or possible purpose as for the uniform tone they had been stained, quite as if some tradesman of the town had bought up a wholesale lot of vermilion paint and sold it at a tempting price.

His wandering glance returned to the little whip.

"Isn't there some mistake?" he asked in the weary way he had, as if he really didn't care whether answered or not.

"There's mistakes a-plenty hereabouts. What partic'lar one has taken your eye?"

"Are you sure this is the Gap?"

"Sure? Don't I fetch up here with the U. S. M. three times per week—leastways, don't I, barring accidents? This here's Dismal, right enough."

Parker stared at him for a moment, then stooped to his bag with a suppressed sort of groan.

"*Dismal?* Is all the world color-mad—or only I?"

"What say?"

The tall young man from "furrin" parts did not reply, but led the way down the vermilion street, past three rough-planked stores, brazen in their false fronts and florid signs, past several dwellings cowering from their comparative insignificance.

The driver, who, from the rear, had been vociferating their itinerary, called a halt before the most pretentious of these, a story-and-a-half frame, with a hospitable-looking porch.

"Now you-uns just climb onto the stoop and take a good, lively whack at the door," he advised. "Aunt Hootie Plott will take powerful good care of you, and I'll drop down your trunk when I bring in the stage."

With inward misgivings Parker saw and heard.

"Aunt Hootie? Is this the hotel?"

"Best in the Gap." Tobe paused to spit with vigor and at great distance before he added: "Fact is, it's the *only*, and full of home-comforts. If you fall foul of a toothache, say, Aunt Hootie's husband will dentist you. Made his own nerve-pullers, did the doc, and they certain-sure can yank."

"Let's hope that I don't fall foul," observed Parker, his right cheek crinkling in a smile.

The little whip's face was leathern, both of texture and hue. Not once had its surface given to emotion on the journey. Now, however, looking up into that winning Calvin Parker smile, a look of concern, almost of pity, spilled from his eyes to his mouth.

"Say, stranger, you-all be kind of keerful, will you? It's Tobe Riker telling you—you be *keerful*!"

His emphasis unexplained, he turned and flat-footed it off to enlist that helping hand needed to re-

store equilibrium and mobility to his official charge.

Parker's smile had quickly retired. He stood frowning after his squat adviser. Why should he be careful in Dismal Gap—he who knew the darkest shadows as well as the brightest lights of Broadway and its tributary streets, the wickedest alleys of Paris, the roughest camps of the old West? He moistened his lips. Especially in view of his mission, why should he be careful?

A thought came of the girl Vernaluska. That must be it. Obviously the stage-driver was hard hit and out of favor. Preoccupation with his team had not prevented his seeing her drag another out of the ditch. Tobe was jealous, as proved by his spleen over her appointment with that high-sounding suitor—was King Currie the name? He merely had reiterated his warning that the homespun girl was not for “furrin” suit.

The situation was amusing, cheaply dramatic from a moving-picture point of view. It would have appealed to Sylvia Brainard's sense of humor.

Here was he who had come to seek solitude and surcease of strife, pitched from the top seat of a stage, dragged from a mud bath by a “cantankerous” mountain belle, advised of unknown dangers by a resentful country swain.

But Sylvia was there and he was here—sent here, he must remember, by Sylvia.

The door of the hotel distinguished as “only” was promptly opened, but not by one who possibly could have claimed the title of “aunt.” A man, fat of figure and jovial-jowled, listened to his application.

“I am Dr. Plott, and powerful glad of the honor,”

was the landlord's response, accompanied by a bow as deep as his well-fed condition would permit. "*She* went out a spell ago, but come you right in."

No registration was required, and but scant ceremony to arrange for an indefinite tenancy of the "best" room, which, according to the verbose tooth-jumper, would be "tidied up" the minute "*she*" returned from the errand of mercy which had taken her from her "home and domicile."

In justice to Calvin Parker, any description of his appearance has been postponed to the moment when he emerged from the vermilion-painted hotel. His clothes had come to be the best part of him, and the condition of those just doffed would have put him at a disadvantage.

Now, he must have been conspicuous in any society mountain resort for the tailoring of his Norfolk and the "latest" check of his knickerbockers. In lieu of the muddied cap of a few moments since, he wore Fifth Avenue's newest in velour head-gear. His shoes and puttees, the kerchief in his breast-pocket, the lock of hair that would defy lifelong discipline to point downward toward his left eye—everything about him was immaculate.

As for what there was left of himself, he would have stood fully six feet had he straightened for measurement; his frame was large, if lank, his fresh-shaven face pale as its brunette nature would allow, his hair and eyes dark.

Despite the promptness and care of his change, his movements were listless, as though he had no definite objective. On the top step of the porch he paused for further consideration of the April tints of the landscape.

In vain did he seek some shade of that color which he felt he had reason to expect in the Blue Ridge country. A shudder went through him as again he was struck by the significance in Dismal Gap's red motif. The single street was a wide streak of it; building foundations were splashed with it; upon the hillsides bare patches showed the soil fervid with it. Was it a sign? Was there danger in it for him?

Colors had been the nearest to religion in his ill-spent life and red was the color he was fleeing. He had come to the mountains hoping to see blue. And red—*red* was everywhere!

He swallowed to moisten his throat; he licked both parched lips; then at once his tongue returned to comfort the dry roof of his mouth. With a sudden access of energy, as if moved by a call, he descended the steps and started up the street.

CHAPTER II

SATISFACTION SOUGHT

THE first of the false-fronted store buildings showed to be empty. Upon its steps a negro lay sunning himself, mouth agape, eyelids tight-shut in a doze. As a source of information he had value chiefly in being the one human visible along the stretch of street. Calvin Parker turned in and prodded him considerably with the toe of his shoe.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mose, but——"

"Howdy, cap'n!" was the return, not spoken until the black had achieved his feet. "I 'spect you're suffering from mistook identification. My name ain't never been Mose, noway."

"Not Mose? That *is* singular. What then?"

"I'm a Lee nigger, cap'n. Cotton Eye in the course of personification."

As if to verify the claim, he pointed a stubbed forefinger to the corner of one eye, the iris of which showed white, at once giving him a most sinister look and explaining his sobriquet. The other eye was unflecked, round, small, dull as soot.

"Cotton Eye Lee"—Parker took a fresh start—"I'm a stranger in a strange land and very much in need of advice which you can give."

Leaning, he murmured a question close to one of the assertive black ears.

A time or two the negro batted his flecked eye, over what proved to be the form of the question rather than its substance.

"Prodigious—prodigious," he repeated, evidently intent on adding to his vocabulary. "That is easy, cap'n," he replied at last. "I prodigious that you-all can quench it at the spring which is transfixed behind the post-office up yon."

Impatience controlled Parker's expression. His heavy lids drooped over the searching look of his eyes. Simultaneously his right hand slunk into a pocket of his knickers.

"Water is very well in a tub," he said. "What I am asking you, as man to man, is where to get a *drink*."

A dollar bill was drawn from the checked depths, to be smoothed out between the interlocutor's palms.

"I reckon you ben't referencing to bust-head, now, be you, cap'n?" asked the negro in an unctuous voice.

"We'll christen it what you like, if you'll lead me to it."

The mismated eyes remained on the green-back, the thick lips pouched well over their ivories, the black brow puckered in a cartoon of despair as Cotton Eye replied: "In consideration of all the circumstantial, I 'spect we can't have the christening, noway."

"What circumstances? Why can't we?"

"Cap'n, don't you-uns know that Nor' Carolina is dry as the dust of a shank-bone?"

To Parker the reluctant admission was the whine of his destiny, the wail of doom. It was true, then,

even as Spencer Pope had declared? The prescription for his own case, which he himself had suggested that Spence and Sylvia dictate, had been correctly filled. He would have to gulp down the dose.

In that moment he realized that all along he had been expecting to find some oasis in the Southern Sahara to which he had been exiled. Yet he might have known that Spencer, through his long service in the Internal Revenue Department, with a best friend's interests at heart, would make no error in the geography of drought.

"Land sakes," insisted the little black, "them ternal drys has done closed up even the 'spensary! Leastwise——"

Something in the suspension of the last word, in the cling of the batting eyes to his hand, in the listening turn of the outstanding ears gave Parker hope. Deliberately he crumpled the dollar bill and made a movement toward its retirement.

The stubbed hand twitched after it.

"I was about to say, cap'n, that if you meander yourself, just casual-like, up to the post-office and make known your hankerings to General Asa Simms, him being mogul of the wets yerabouts, he might—although yet again he mightn't—like the looks of you-uns' personal appearance enough to——"

"He's got the red-eye on tap?"

The informant, having deposited the bill where it might not easily be dislodged, leered humorously.

"Now you've sayed it! He's sure enough got the red-eye."

The post-office proved to be combined with a

general store. On entering, Parker was annoyed to see the girl who, in a way, had ushered him into Dismal Gap. Probably she had missed the "meet-in'" she was to have kept—and on account of washing out his ears. In view of the urgency of his errand and his increased sense of obligation toward her, her presence was most unfortunate.

She was seated on a stationary stool before the counter, fingering a cluttered array of dry-goods. The tall, gaunt-featured individual leaning toward her from behind the counter he assumed to be "General" Simms, the master mogul who just might, and yet again, might not embrace him in brotherly love.

Neither looked up as he started across the floor, a fact which seemed studied, if not more unpleasantly significant. Assuming what he hoped would look an easy, waiting posture against the shelf before the mail wicket, he framed in his intentions perfunctory words calculated to express gratitude to her who had unbogged him. His debt to her must be canceled.

While leaning and waiting, he began to notice other things than the hair of her so inappropriately named for a mountain. Next to color, lines—so read his litany.

And she had lines, other than those excellent ones of white-stockinged leg. Her body, while slender to thinness and crudely clad, showed not an offensive angle. It had, rather, the sinuous yield of youth. Her profile, as outlined against the gloom of the store's interior, was cut like a cameo—forehead massed low with that marvelous hair, nose quite straight and well sized, mouth short-lipped and gen-

erous, chin strong, yet saved by the gracious, long sweep of her throat.

Truly, even though in her "ornery" nature she might emulate the austerity of Mt. Vernaluska, the namesake was pleasant enough to see! Despite the resentment of his inner man at her delay of his present plans, he acknowledged that, as a creditor, she might have been worse.

Although beyond the range of their lowered voices, he could not help suspecting from the store-keeper's indirect glances toward the door that himself and not the bolts of print-goods had become the subject under discussion. This impression was strengthened when the girl, without waiting to complete any purchase, arose and started toward the rear of the store, where an open door promised egress.

Parker started after her.

"I beg pardon, Miss—Miss——" he began.

She turned with an expression so surprised that he could not be sure whether it was real or assumed.

"You seem always to be going away"—when he had bridged the space between them. "Down the road you didn't give me time to express——"

"What goes without expressing." Her interruption was put in that same modulated voice he had appreciated even in his confused, earlier state. "Don't you-all feel in my debt; the look of you had done paid me in advance."

The look of him—had he, then, looked so ridiculous before she had cleaned him up? Even so, she needn't have reminded him. Why was she mak-

ing it so uncommonly hard to thank her? They usually wanted to be thanked, women.

"Nevertheless, as an entire stranger and one not addicted to mud baths so much as——"

"As you seem to be afflicted with loss of words," she again made breezy interruption. "I know it ain't good manners to mention such things, but I've missed one meetin' on your account, and there'll be a second if I don't shuffle along."

"So Tobe Riker steamed over a drop of truth for once!"

Both turned at the entrance of a new voice into the parley. Just outside the door stood a young man splendidly built and of more sophisticated appearance than any Parker had so far met in the region.

The exclamation itself was enough to identify him. Evidently the stage-driver had met up with the formidable Currie, about whom any stranger was due to find out who tried "setting" up to his lady of scorn. To judge by his looks, the man in the door had heard the reason why Miss Metcalf had failed to keep her appointment with him, and felt "disgusted some."

At once the girl seemed to forget the beneficiary of her accidental lapse, in obligation to him who had lost thereby.

"Why didn't you wait, Rex? I wasn't such an awful stretch late. Your temper's too quick. I might have delayed leaving home; Solomon might have taken a lay-me-down streak; a dozen things might have been to blame."

The newcomer had removed his hat from a carefully-brushed shock of dark brown hair and stepped

into the room. Parker noticed that he wore his "store" clothes well, that his cheerful-hued tie was not of the ready-knotted variety, that his short mustache was properly trimmed. He was, on the whole, rather exceptionally handsome, with bold, but well-cut features, gray eyes of a fiery, restless expression and sensitive mouth. Amusing that the leathern-skinned little whip should hope for a chance against this young Adonis!

"A dozen regular things might have been to blame for sure, Verney, only they weren't," he was saying. "I'm a right fair waiter where you're concerned, but I've got my limits."

"Sorry to have been the cause of deranging the plans of you good folks," Parker spoke up pleasantly. "Quite—quite inadvertant, I assure you."

Currie met this overture in good part. "No particular harm has been done—yet."

In the pause which doubly emphasized the three-lettered suggestion, his glance returned to the girl, whose face now showed a faint flush, perhaps in resentment of what he had implied, rather than said. The smile with which she favored Parker took his breath.

"I trust you don't suffer none—not even headache—from your spill?"

The eyes of the camouflaged hillbilly, which had moved from one to the other, seemed to take fire, although he still maintained his tolerant manner.

"And now, hon, if you've said enough pretties to the stranger, let's be moving if I'm to ride home with you. Glad to have met you, stranger, and good-by."

"Why say good-by?"

Parker's question went unanswered and not because put in such banal form. He saw that some other question was at issue, one in which he had no voice. Currie had laid a persuasive hand upon the girl's arm, only to have it vigorously shaken off.

"Hon?" she repeated, her voice whittled to the edge with which she had nipped Tobe Riker. "Since when——"

But she seemed to think better of a public rebuke. With a shrug, she continued her interrupted progress toward the rear door. On the sill she paused, turned and, in very face of her splendid looking suitor's resentment, sent Parker another of those pulse-stirring smiles.

Not until after she had passed into the yard, after he had nodded automatically to Currie and seen the last of the powerful back disappearing in her wake, did Parker move. He was absorbed in thoughts about that smile of hers, in conjecture over just what combinations of form and color made it so radiant, in deliberate effort to store the first impression of it in a brain-cell from which it might be taken out later at will. Such life, youth, tenderness was in it—could it be reproduced in oils?

His appreciation was in no way spoiled by knowing that it had not been meant for him, really. Although focused directly upon him, her eyes had been as elusive as seemed her disposition, their expression as impersonal as might have been those of a model posing for that especial effect. She had smiled on him, he knew, to punish her admirer for assumption of an authority over her which evidently she had not given him—*yet*.

And it was a good thing she had not meant it for

him—that would have increased his obligation. But what if he hadn't deposited it safe in that memory cell?

Already the vitality of it was slipping from him, now that she had gone. Just possibly—— Well, he might need to see that smile again.

CHAPTER III

STRANGER UNWELCOME

"YES, sir?"

The succinct question startled Parker from his thoughts—returned them with a swallow to his momentarily forgotten quest. He found that the lank proprietor, who had been occupied during the back-door colloquy rewinding print-bolts and restoring them to the shelves, now stood in the aisle behind him. In the voice was no trace of the mountain drawl which he was coming to take for granted; rather, it had a pronounced Yankee twang. A pair of pale-gray eyes were fixed upon him in an intense look.

"I assume," Parker began, "that you are Postmaster Simms?"

"You assume correctly, both as to my name and office. If you are expecting mail, there's none for you."

At this curt reply to a query unasked Parker forced an increase of friendliness into his manner.

"But how can you be sure when you don't know my name?" he suggested engagingly.

Simm's attitude did not change. "This office pigeon-holes no mail to-day addressed to persons not known to me. Any other business?"

He who had such urgent "other business" tried

to silence the demands of the comptroller within himself, tried for *finesse*. It was evident that Simms did not take to him at first glance, was not going to embrace him fraternally. He was accustomed to having people like him; he must explain his presence, ingratiate himself.

"I'm a stranger in your village, Mr. Simms—Calvin A. Parker, a well-meaning painter of pictures who——"

"Who wouldn't have to be very good to be better than those who have come to these parts before. Artist? Well, you look it!"

The comptroller reminded Parker that everything depended on his seeming good nature. "I had something of a shake-up just outside the village; got chucked into the ditch from——"

"Verney Metcalf told me all about that. I find myself right busy this afternoon."

Again the mogul of the wets had cut him off.

"I hoped you might be able to tell me of some cabin not too far back in the Blue Ridge which I could rent for the summer."

"And what do you want a cabin for?"

Into this doubtful conversational overture Parker plunged. "I'm keen about hunting, for one thing."

"This section's all hunted out, sir. There ain't enough game left for folks that live here and have a right to it. You'd find better hunting elsewhere, say, down in the Tusquite or the Nantahala country."

"But killing is not my chief vice. What I came for is to get some of your Blue Ridge colors on canvas."

Simms's head threw back and his unpleasantly

long nose inflated. "We've had artists here before, I tell you, and they were none too popular."

"Was their work so bad?"

The self-declared member of the profession was determined to bear up to the last.

"It wasn't their work so much, young fellow. It's just that painting in general ain't good hereabouts. I don't mind at all telling you this gratis."

Parker bowed his acknowledgments.

"Aside from the reasons mentioned, Mr. Simms, I think a few months in your mountains will benefit my health. I hoped you might happen to know of——"

The postmaster, in his next interruption, assumed the gravity of a physician when he advises a patient to make his will.

"Health? Don't you ever believe it. Whoever told you that must have had evil designs on you. This is a most unhealthy country for strangers. After I moved here from Vermont, I was five years getting acclimated. Besides which, there ain't any cabin vacant. Since the State went dry we've been shaking hands with prosperity, and every hut is chock-a-block, for a fact."

The pharisaical expression and devout delivery of this last discouragement might have overcome Parker's doubts had not his nostrils collected certain whiffs of adverse testimony. The postmaster's breath was unmistakable—a complete vindication of Cotton Eye's tribute, "mogul of the wets."

"Almost do you make me believe," he said more cheerfully, "that strangers are unwelcome in Dismal Gap."

"Almost do you get me right." For the moment

Simms's manner approached graciousness. "Mildly speaking, strangers *are* unwelcome. You wouldn't be likely to enjoy a visit here—certainly not in those clothes—hunting either pictures or health."

"Somehow, I'm not so sure—even in these clothes." The young man smoothed his left sleeve with his right hand respectfully.

"Anyway, there's no empty cabin for you," snapped the postmaster.

All through the interview those other Parkers had been advising their descendant. Now they nudged him, warned him not to lose his temper. His manner did them proud.

"At least there is no necessity for me to leave Mrs. Plott's before I can have a tent sent over from the city. Thanks for your cordial reception, Mr. Simms."

His real "business" unbroached, he left the store. Fractious as were certain of his sensibilities over the failure of his errand, others were diverted. Did they think him a yeggman, a jail-bird, or what? Had Tobe Riker preceded his passenger to the village court of appeals to protect his own heart interest? Or could it be that Vernaluska Metcalf herself had turned down those long, strong thumbs of hers at the calico counter before King Currie had appeared to "rile" her into that wonderful smile?

He was about to repass the dried-up dispensary where, a short while before, he had awakened Cotton Eye Lee and a breastful of hope, when the light burst upon him with radium strength. He stopped short, began to grin, lifted his eyes. From out the clear he saw why he was stranger unwelcome in Dismal Gap.

His whole past life seemed to have been but preface to the present moment—this culminative, thrilling, delicious moment. He had been reading a book, at it were, whose elaborate preparation had educated him up to full enjoyment of an incomparably humorous dénouement. Moved by a desire to luxuriate in it, he strode to the stoop, worn down by the boots of thirsty hillbillies in the wet, wet days gone, never to return. There he settled, before yielding to the emotion already agitating him.

Chuckles began to escape him, interspersed with ejaculations, although there was none to hear along the empty street.

"I declare! I do declare! So that's it? I get the whole thing now—such an utterly funny thing. Me to be taken for—for *that*! Shades of Sylvia and Spence—*what* would they say?"

In the very onrush of his paroxysms of mirth he strangled them in order the more calmly to realize their cause.

He, Calvin A. Parker, had been sent into the mountains of North Carolina to get beyond temptation. Spencer Pope, collector of internal revenue, supposed to know the region, had selected it. But Spencer, blinded by confidence in the enforcement of the excise laws, had overlooked a thing or two or three. In the choice of an alleged bone-dry territory as the stage of a fight for abstinence, he had failed to consider the possibility of an illicit liquor traffic.

And here were the woods so full of moonshine that he—subject of the experiment—had at once come under the suspicion which had wronged so many strangers before him, none of whom could

possibly have been as innocent of hostile intent, as kindly disposed toward the regional industry as he. He—"poor Cal Parker"—to be taken for a revenue sleuth!

But anyhow, anyhow—— No diagram of his discovery, no tracing of its side-issues could expand the delicious irony of that first perception. There was he, wreck of a great name, ruin of a career, sent into the hills to forget "the curse"; and here had he walked, straight as though following a call, into its birth-place, where it best might be remembered. His dear, delightful curse!

What a joke—*what* a joke—on Sylvia and Spencer back in old New York; on Tobe Riker and Asa Simms and Rex Currie; on all the Red-Blue Ridgers here at hand.

And what a game had been given him to play! The dire suspicion that he was an official fighter of the demon he had blindly served—he must not disturb that, since its hazard was the quip. Would he play? Well, now! Even without his desire to perpetuate on canvas a really vital smile, the prospect captivated him.

His chuckles developed until he held both sides with his hands in an effort to control them. Next breath, giving up to the irresistible, he began to rock back and forth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" escaped him in *mezzo voce*; then: "Ho, ho!" in bass.

He laughed and laughed—until he held on to the floor. More and more regardless rose his voice, quite as though he were alone in the village.

"Well, stranger, you seem to be enjoying yourself!"

It was a voice he had heard somewhere before, a strong, humorous, yet caustic voice, that put the silencer upon Parker's risibilities. Opening his eyes he perceived a long shadow before him; lifting them, he saw Rex Currie standing in the road, interestedly regarding him.

"Oh, how do you do? I—I am." Parker smoothed out his features, struggled for coherence. "You—you know, I can see a joke when it's poked right at me."

"So can I," offered Currie, still eying him.

"I thought you were in such a hurry to go home with the girl of the—with Miss Metcalf."

"I was, but I sighted some unfinished business that's delayed me a spell. Don't let me cork your enjoyment." The handsome suitor of the girl of the smile positively scowled as he added: "I reckon you're entitled to enjoy yourself—*while you can!*"

After which impressive observance he nodded, started up the street, disappeared within the emporium of Asa Simms.

"*While you can!*" The echo jeered in the mind of Calvin Parker, again headed toward the Hotel Plott.

"*Yet!*" The same emphasis had been given one word back in the store.

There had been reason enough for him to "cork" his enjoyment in that he seldom felt like doing things he was told to do. Currie had advised him to laugh on, hence he had ceased.

But why should the grim note in a strange countryman's voice blunt the point of the joke—his incomparable joke?

CHAPTER IV

GLORY BE!

AT the house of Plott, down the street, "she" had returned from her mission, as Parker was appraised before he had opportunity to turn the knob of the front door. Scarcely, indeed, had his foot lifted to the porch level when the portal threw open and a wisp-woman in black and white—homespun black of dress, starched white of collar and cuffs—rushed at him.

Of her identity there could be no doubt. Her cordial, outstretched hands, the lack of reservation in her smile, the beam of her brown eyes behind silver-rimmed spectacles—all would have proclaimed her one of the "aunts" of the world. And when she spoke, the name "Hootie" fitted, no matter what its derivation or acquired meaning.

"Welcome, friend Parker!" she exclaimed.

Her voice was peculiar—Southern-soft, yet high-pitched—a sort of muffled staccato.

"After looking forward to your arrival so anxiously," she continued, "it seems too bad that I could not have been here to greet you. Many as are Hezekiah's virtues, he sometimes fails in cordiality. Of course, poor man, it's only natural that his profession should harden him to the finer feelings of others. But, whatever comes, we're both on your side, which is the right side, glory be!"

On the printed page, these remarks are punctuated according to custom; as Mrs. Plott delivered them, they were hooted without a pause.

Parker could have found no place to interrupt, even had he wished to do so. In truth, his mind was fully engaged with the jig-saw puzzle her words presented—the “friend Parker” of her opening, the declaration that she had been expecting him, the reference to their companionable stand on the side of “right.” Glory be—that expressed it.

“I—I fear there has been some mistake,” he interpolated when able.

Reproach entered, but did not mar the graciousness of her expression.

“I reckon it is short notice to expect you to trust me, but you don’t look like a person slow at learning. Time is all-important and——”

“But I could not have been expected,” he was so successful as to interrupt, “and I never take sides when any one but myself is concerned. Certainly I can’t lay claim to virtues which——”

“Oh, you jewel—you jewel! He wouldn’t for anything let his right hand know, would he, now?”

Her manner was nothing short of rapturous. Clamping his arm with a grip that was violence as contrasted with her bird claw of a hand, she propelled him across the porch and through the doorway into the hall.

“Let my right know?” he muttered, rather stupidly, *en route*.

“Oh, you jewel!” she hooted. “Now don’t you say another word! I’ve got a-plenty more than five senses, and I understand—understand to the fullest degree. You’re just what I prayed you’d be. You’re

deep, but I see down into you. I see victory ahead if only you won't be too drastic at the start. You've got to promise your Aunt Hootie right here and now that you'll be mighty careful."

That warning again!

"Madam," he began in as sane and commonplace a manner as he could command, "your advice is the third such I have received since my arrival in Dismal Gap a couple of hours ago; may I so far trespass upon your kindness as to inquire why and of just what I should be careful?"

"Superb! You sure enough will fill the bill. The set of your jaw foretells the end. You'll win your fight."

These ejaculations were backward-flung, as the little lady tripped along the hall toward that "best room" door.

Parker followed, but not until he had directed the inquiring look of one man just meeting another into his reflection in the small hat-rack mirror.

Back in the room that was temporarily his own by right of rental, he listened to her from the perch she had selected on the edge of the bed with the growing conviction that the face he had seen in the mirror was a strange one.

"I've tidied things up as best I might. As I said to Hezekiah, we can't do too much for a young man who is taking his very life in his hands. At least you will have the bulwark of our prayers and all the encouragement of our loyal hearts, which may help a little, even though a fight in behalf of right is always its own best reward."

Parker slumped into a rocking-chair. Stretching open his large palms, he examined their emptiness

curiously. Just what they had told him at home—his life, his future he must take into his own hands. Just what Sylvia had told him at the last meeting, although couched in different words—that the most earnest well-wishes of her heart would go with him, but that his victory must needs be his reward, since he had proved to their world that she was not enough. He must fight out his fight in new scenes, alone; that was what they all had agreed.

Yet what could this wisp-woman know about it? Never, except that last awful once, had he brooked discussion of his—well, his peculiarity.

He straightened in his seat, gazed across at her.

"I fear you're suffering some misapprehension as to my identity, Mrs. Plott. I'm just a more-or-less inoffensive citizen, visiting the Blue Ridge for the first time in my life on business which concerns none but myself. Dismal Gap happened to be recommended to me by a friend named Pope, because he——"

"Pope—Spencer Pope? I hoped it—I *knew* it!"

Her state of ecstasy seemed to have reached a superlative degree. She clasped thin arms across a thin chest and hugged herself, her brown eyes held dotingly on him the while.

Parker's small accession of dignity deserted, leaving him with a helpless feeling. "You—you know Spencer?"

"*Know* him? Didn't he board with us for months over at Killpeter Cove, when Hezekiah and I first came down from Virginia, looking for a cavity—a dental opening?"

"Do you mean to tell me," queried Parker in

turn, "that Pope has written you—told you that I was coming, and why?"

The brown-gray head wagged slyly. "It is enough to know that he sent you—enough for any of us stalwart drys!"

She favored him with a confidential smile. Additionally, one of her eyelids fluttered downward in what looked very like a wink of reassurance.

To Parker there came a new conviction. She, too, believed him a revenue sleuth!

"Did you," she asked, with intentional irrelevance, "take to Hezekiah? There is a man for you! 'Strength of the Lord' is what his name means, and never in all our married years has he been daunted by the stubbornest root set in human gums, no more than he has so far capitulated to the Demon Rum as to let a drop of intoxicating liquor pass his lips."

"How unfortunate that all men have not Hezekiah's advantages!" Reduced to flattery in the emergency, Parker focused upon her his peculiarly winning smile. "A woman of your sort must—must change a man vastly."

"In your case," she added, "I appreciate a difference. Hezekiah needs nerve, to be sure, jerking teeth; but you need nerve of a different sort, battling for the right with these blockaders. What with all that's ahead of you, with the necessity of absolute self-control, with one emergency close after the one that's gone before—well, I believe you ought to be allowed anything that helps you. In you I could even excuse the occasional use of a drop or two of alcoholic spirits—of course, for medicinal purposes *only*—to strengthen those poor nerves of

yours, which must be frazzled at times, the life you lead."

No matter how much the little woman was mistaken in him, she spoke truly. His nerves were frazzled—and from the life he had led! Could he convince her of this? Dared he put her broad-mindedness to an immediate test?

"If it weren't for our nerves, life would be a different sort of thing, wouldn't it?" he began, allowing his smile to deepen, to quiver, as if struggling to survive against odds. He grasped the support of the rocker arms. "You may have heard how I was dumped off the stage to-day. I'm ashamed of the way I feel, but I'm not overly strong and I—I have had a most trying——"

His voice dwindled; his eyes closed; he looked overcome.

Aunt Hootie sped to him, seized and began to chafe his hands, demonstrated anew the appropriateness of her title.

"You poor boy—you poor, brave boy!" she exclaimed. "You must lie flat and get rested up. And you need something to brace you. Would you now—do you think a little sip of spirits—just a thimbleful—would strengthen you?"

Parker shrank back, as if to ward off a repugnant suggestion. Then: "It—it might," he admitted.

She hastened away. He kept his eyes closed until he heard her in the hall, opened them to gaze around him dazedly.

Was he dreaming some bright dream? Or was it true that the despairing demands of the comptroller within were about to be supplied from the

very least likely source? He moistened his parched lips in anticipation.

Canceled were the obligations he had acknowledged to Sylvia, the vows he had made to her and Spencer Pope after that last, humiliating night in New York. What was a fellow's obligation toward others, compared with that toward himself?

Exorcised was the spirit that had incited him to fling from a Pullman window the half-emptied flask which Spencer mercifully had slipped him at the last. What was any new resolve compared to the screaming need of all past years?

Total abstinence was not a man's vow, ran his mental argument. It was an acknowledgment of weakness rather than of strength. He would work out his own salvation, yes; but work it out according to deep-deduced theories of his own. Wine was good and meant for the use of mankind, just as were other fruits of the earth. He would learn its proper usage, would learn control. He would parse for Spencer and Sylvia the meaning of the word temperance. What was there in life if one might not have his cake and nibble at it, too?

She was returning, Aunt Hootie. Her light, decisive footsteps were loudening toward him from the hall. His spirits chirked up at the sound; a great affection for her was prematurely born. Dear, quaint, kind Aunt Hootie—to think that she of all the world should be the self-elected pharmacist to revise the prescription especially written for him!

His eyes were again closed as she hurried to him, but closed over exultation. In one glance he had seen and measured the bottle she carried—a pint container, or he never had emptied one—nearly full

of red-brown liquid. His hands wavered toward her, in one the wash-stand tumbler, of which he had possessed himself. But——

"Better let me pour it, friend Parker. How many drops?"

Horried, he heard her question. His lids flashed up over eyes swimming in the moisture of unfeigned agony. He saw that she held in her other hand an eye-cup half full of water and a medicine dropper. He groaned aloud as he sank, limp and despairing, back into the chair. The tumbler fell with a small crash to the floor.

Although far from a ruse on his part, this demonstration had a magical effect upon the nurse of medicinal intent. She proved herself an advocate of heroic treatment. Flitting to the wash-stand, she laid down the dropper, emptied into the pitcher the water from the eye-cup, poured it full of undiluted whisky, forced it to the lips of him in so pitiful a state of collapse.

"Poor, brave boy—you sure do need the medicine!"

Parker drained the draft, waited a few seconds, glanced up at her with gratitude too vital for words.

No matter what called—"medicine," "drops," "curse"—the liquor she had supplied was beyond criticism, even from him. It was mellow, dynamic, smooth. It aroused the necessity for more.

"I—I seem to be coming 'round," he faltered. "You are very good to me. So sorry to worry you. That spill from the stage must have jolted me worse than I realized. Perhaps if I forced down another, I—I——"

An imperative knock on the front door sounded.

In the act of measuring him a second dose, Aunt Hootie paused. She glanced at him anxiously, handed him both cup and bottle, hurried into the hall.

On her return she must have seen that he had not suffered from her enforced neglect. Relief, perhaps, blinded her to the fact that the liquid for medicinal purposes only, whose bottle now stood upon the wash-hand-stand, had lost the red-brown richness of its color. Rather, it was a pale, translucent amber.

"If you feel well enough——" She hesitated, one hand held behind her. "It seems very strange that we heard the knock, but not any steps on the stoop. Not a soul was there when I opened. I found this tucked under the sill—a letter addressed to you."

The incident did seem strange, even before he tore open the flap. "Mr. C. A. Parker, Care of His Friends," was scrawled across the envelope. After he had read the contents once to himself, he reread them aloud:

"C. A. PARKER, New York.

"SIR: We know you. The stage leaves for the railroad at 3 P.M. A word is supposed to be sufficient to the wise. You ain't wise, so we write you several. Unless you hanker to ride out in a box, you'll heed them.

"FOLKS THAT SAY WHAT THEY MEAN
AND MEAN WHAT THEY SAY."

When Parker glanced up, he saw tha' a look of positive terror was distorting Mrs. Plott's face. Both hands were clawed into the neat white collar at her throat.

"All, *all* is lost!" she cried. "They have recognized you."

"Everybody seems to have recognized me except myself."

He achieved his feet and gazed around uncertainly, as if returned by the note to his "frazzled" state.

"Undoubtedly they are aware of your mission."

"In that, too, they have the advantage over me."

She began to hurry about the room.

"A terrible advantage—that is certainly so!" she exclaimed, ignoring what evidently she regarded as camouflage. "They mean to do you up unless you go at once. Far be it from us to add another victim to the score! That clock is right—I set it this A.M. It is ten of three now. Here, I'll help you pack! It will be all you can do to make the stage."

Parker seemed to be estimating the value of luggage against that of life.

"All I can do, *if* I pack. But why take unnecessary risks? Three, you say? I—I guess I won't wait!"

Suddenly bereft of audience, the little lady stood gaping in the direction of his sudden disappearance, hooting mentally and regretfully.

What a shame it was—and he had looked such a jewel! Yet she couldn't blame any one fleeing those liquor-maddened fiends of hell. Would the drys never be able to stifle the deadly fumes? Poor boy, he sure was a wreck from the life he had led! She had best be packing up his traps; he would likely mail her an address. *What* a narrow escape!

CHAPTER V

DEPARTURE DELAYED

REPAIRS to the faulty axle of the Concord relic had been rushed by the village smith; so that, on the stroke of three, the stage driver pulled up with a flourish before the post-office and general store. The lean mail-bag tossed him by Asa Simms he stowed beneath the box and reached for the whip, in preparation for a dashing start on his return trip.

"Hold your hosses, Tobe!" The advice came from Rex Currie who stood, magnificently indolent, leaning against a post of the high porch. "I've got an idea you needn't be lonesome on the back-drive."

The little whip showed both surprise and impatience. After the super-effort of himself and the smithy, it seemed a shame to be delayed. But he wound the reins around the whip-stock, flopped his legs over the end of the seat, severed a generous quid from a black square of plug.

"You-uns don't be meaning the same dude I brung out?" he asked, his "chaw" well under way.

Currie nodded.

"The identical dude. Cotton Eye ought to be back any minute now from delivering him an invite to repair at once to a party at Anywheres-Else. Unless I miss a guess, we-all will be favored before long by the sight of him making going-away-from-

here signals. Asa and the rest of us won't be disgusted none if you spread thick your remarks to him about what a plumb desperate population lives around the Gap."

"You-all can count on me, I reckon."

Riker's assurance was what had been expected of him. In his general utility vocation, he had tried to assume neutrality between the factions which had long been reaching for each other's throats; but at heart, both from inclination and practice, he was known by the wets to be one of them.

Provided with his orders and his audience of one, he might be relied upon, unhampered by conscientious scruples, to depict the fate of a prying foreigner as desperate indeed. Since the drys, singing hymns of victory, had swept the State with their official ban against intoxicants in any form, the distillers and distributors of contrabrand had been hard put—that Tobe knew as well as they. Before the "bone," their traffic had been illicit only against the Federal law. Now they were criminals in the eyes also of the State, forced to "watch both ways to onct," as old Tom Metcalf put it when railing against the signs of the time.

Prohibitional progress, however, was not without its advantages, even to the wets. "Outside liquor," in which the Federal government had lost interest on payment of the revenue tax, was now a commonwealth "outlaw," expensive when it could be had at all. Inside, or "domestic dew," therefore, was in greater demand than before and, by natural law, its under-cover market price higher. Blockading promised increasingly lucrative returns, could the industry but survive the double hazard.

That it should survive was exactly what the dries of Dismal Gap, backed by their State and National societies, were determined against. Local bitterness had festered into a sore. Long since, members of the two sides had ceased to be on speaking terms, except to bandy threats. Any moment might break out a contagion of violence.

To the arguments of Rex Currie and Simms, Tobe bowed perforce. Hadn't certain sisters of the dry battalion unwisely divulged that a revenuer was expected soon? Hadn't the day's arrival gone straight to the house of Plott—the fact made none the less significant by Tobe's recommendation of that "only" hotel? Hadn't his first move on reappearing on Trade Street been to quiz a negro as to where he might buy liquor? Hadn't his answers to Asa Simms been downright unsubstantial? As for the laughing fit which Rex had interrupted, how else could that be interpreted than as exultation over anticipated victory?

The case seemed conclusive. Undoubtedly the "dude" was the officer expected, even though his cock-sure ways and antiquated subterfuge of a mission in the name of "art" were not exactly complimentary either to his intelligence or theirs. He deserved the "invite" to leave for "Anywheres-Else" which Rex Currie, his natural animosity fired by a certain Titian flare, had written so immediately and so well.

From within the store Cotton Eye Lee now shuffled.

"I've done earned that swiggle according to instructifications, boss," he announced. "I slips the communicant under the door, knocks good and loud,

then ducks under the porch for a hide-out."

"Are you sure they heard you?" rasped Simms.

"Sure, gen'l. By identification of both eyes, don't I see Mis' Plott herself take in the doo-billy? And don't I come back-way to this here oasis with my tongue rusty-cating for that there—— Oh, Lord! Oh, oh, Lord!"

Up the road and coming toward them, his mis-mated eyes had sighted the ponderous figure of Colonel "Dry" Dryden, acknowledged leader of the Pro-hibs and present employer of his next-to-worthless self. One bound gained him the cover of the store-room, whose back door provided a short-cut to the Dryden place on the hill and the field in which he was supposed to be at work.

The unceremonious departure of their black emissary in nowise disturbed the three before the Simms emporium, but the near approach of their most powerful opponent did.

Rex Currie's habit of leadership it was that met the emergency.

"Old Dry's headed for Plott's, and he'll stop the slick going out," he declared. "He mustn't get that far. The only neutral here assembled is you, Tobe; see you turn him back!"

The wit of the small driver proved large.

"Howdy, colonel! Howdy!" called he. "I just rid in a passenger what was a-looking for you-all. Sent him up yon way, without an idee you'd be coming down this here one. Hope he ain't got lost. Mighty sorry, Colonel."

"I'm obliged to you, suh, just the same," returned Dryden, a pronouncedly Southern personage, from well-shod feet to grizzled goatee. "I was expecting

a visitor, but thought he must be delayed. I'll take the trail home; likely I'll find him already there."

Without deigning a glance toward the two benighted wets on the porch, although proved the keener to their presence on that account, the leader of the dries started on the back road.

"Right neat, Tobe. I'm obliged to you, suh," mimicked Currie, adding, after a glance down the street: "And in the last tick of time you were. Look!"

Parker was hurrying toward them, as if afraid he might be too late. Sighting the stage, his pace slowed.

"I'm a-waiting for you-uns; climb right up!" The driver's greeting was embellished by a leathery leer. "I sure admire to have company, and swear not to chuck you into a nary ditch this time."

Well it was that Currie and Simms wore their "poker faces"; they needed the protection on hearing the "slick's" reply.

"Decent of you to wait, Riker, but I'm not leaving to-day."

"What—you going to leave me to the company of just hoss flies?" complained the wily whip.

"Sorry to deprive you—or any one who wants it—of my company; but I've sighted some unfinished business."

Although Parker did not glance at the originator of his phrase, the hillbilly eased himself off the stoop and picked up a short length of rope which lay upon the ground, as though moved to some sort of action by embarrassment.

"Ain't you forgetting, Asa," he reminded the

emporium's owner, "that blanket you promised to send down to the Corners by Tobe?"

Simms, still on the high stoop, looked his perplexity for a moment; the next his cadaverous face lighted.

"Holy hemlock, I'd forgotten entire!" he exclaimed with unwonted animation. "Wait a half-second longer, Tobe."

He slithered into the store.

Parker, meantime, had recognized the hillbilly's presence with a friendly nod. "Since Riker is good enough to say my not going is a loss, may I hope that you consider my staying a gain? We have so much in common, you and I, we ought to get along splendidly."

"In common?"

Currie flashed him a revealing look. His instant thought of the mountain girl—his suspicion that she was being referred to—showed in the color that spread forward from his stiff-set neck.

"Why, yes," Parker explained. "Although so lately introduced, we have seen that we both appreciate an amusing situation, haven't we? And we both have found unfinished business in Dismal Gap."

"It ain't any dusting of salt to me, stranger, what that business of yours is or isn't, so I can't see that it's a common interest." Currie stepped negligently forward as he spoke, the while winding the rope in a loose coil in the abstracted way of one given to neatness. "Howsomever, leaving me out of it, you had best not count on being pestered to a frazzle with the glad mit hereabouts."

"And you're worried about me?" Parker asked, backing toward the stoop, the fingers of one hand

entering his side knicker-pocket in search of the clasp-knife usually carried there. "I must say that's good of you, old fellow, but it is quite unnecessary. I've had some experience being unwelcome, as it happens, even before——"

Parker never finished his remark.

At the moment something soft, thick, outspread, dropped over his head from the stoop. With a literally smothered curse for his stupidity, he realized that, although on guard against the rope, he had overlooked as a menace that blanket to be sent to the Corners. Asa Simms must have cat-footed it back from his draft upon the emporium shelves. Parker had become a six-foot center pole for an improvised tent.

Before he could shake off the cloying folds, both Simms and Currie were on him. In a flash the rope wrapped his arms so tight against his sides that the pocket knife in his fingers was useless. Although he struggled like a trapped animal, the twain were too much for his body, if not for his mind. Thought, instinct, inspiration caused him to expand his chest and abdomen against the tightening of his bonds.

It was characteristic of Cal Parker that he did not waste himself crying for help which was unlikely to be forthcoming; never had he taken the vicissitudes of life that way. And always he held himself receptive of new sensations. He did not, therefore, miscount when four hands seized him, nor miss the fact that the strength of two men was united in one cause to hurl him violently into the body of the ancient vehicle.

He heard the door slam and a shout from Currie:

"An extra bundle needn't delay you none, Tobe. Dump it at the railroad. On your way!"

The whip cracked, the grays sprang into a gallop, the coach began to race through the Gap's one street. To an outside observer, it would have looked indeed as though Mr. C. A. Parker, so lately from New York, were somewhat hurriedly quitting the Blue Ridge.

But Parker's chest expansion was considerable. On exhaling his precautionary intake of breath, he was able to work his hand upward and locate the catch of the door.

Except for the hoof clatter and rattle of wheels, Tobe Riker, on the box, must have heard the thud of something heavy on the road. As it was, however, not until he reached his destination did he realize that the "bundle" entrusted to his care had delivered itself. His chagrin was increased next day when he learned the immediateness with which initiative had animated it.

Directly before the Hotel Plott a blanket-covered ball lay in the road. On recovery from the back-to-dust impact, it began to unwrap, straightened into he-man length, developed feet and the apparent desire to make them its base.

By the time Aunt Hootie, having lifted her eyes from her packing at the noise, rushed out on investigation bent, a knife-blade from within had slashed upward through the blanket. When there appeared a perturbed-looking fedora, still atop the surprisingly unperturbed face of "the poor, brave boy" whom she had been mourning as lost to the cause——

"Glory be!" she exclaimed fervently.

CHAPTER VI

THE CONSPIRATORS

IT was a good thing, as the evening turned out, that the Dust Dry League, in secret session assembled within the cave sacred to their councils, had voted unanimously to table all regular business and give whole-hearted attention to the affairs of the stranger who, in their midst at least, seemed not unwelcome.

Mysteriously enough, Calvin Parker had been invited to attend. "Sociable," "meeting," "gathering"—various terms which covered, rather than explained the nature of the event had been applied by the Plotts. And never, in the whole course of his highly social and variegated past, had he been introduced so ambitiously as by Aunt Hootie to the half-dozen faithful.

"Heaven-sent!" The irony of the thing demanded instant control of his voice and the most benign expression in his facial repertoire.

Straightway he had found himself shaking hands with one Colonel Aloysius Dryden, through right of leadership an undisputed first, although crowded by a spinster of height, angularity and importance, the secretary of the league.

The Gap's one minister contributed a flabby grip, but firm assurance of his "blessing." A somewhat melancholy looking farmer, his overly cheerful and

bounteous good-wife and a moral of a man referred to affectionately as "a brand plucked from the burning of rum," completed the gathering.

With surprise Parker stared about the natural rendezvous for sessions dark and deep, to which he had been conducted across lots and up a twisted "run" by the Plotts, their every step histful. The tunnel-like entrance of some dozen feet had bent him double, but he now stood in a sizable chamber, lighted by a single kerosene lamp upon a deal table, and furnished, through virtue of several benches and boxes, with a seating capacity of three times their number.

"A right neat hide-out, don't you think?" hooted his particular hostess. "To think that ages and eons ago He should have created this refuge for us harassed Gappers!"

"And who harasses you?"

The little worthy-worker upcurved a glance of reproach for the superfluity of his question.

"Who harassed you into a blanket and into the stage and into the dust of Trade Street this very afternoon? We've tried the schoolhouse, the church and our own hearth-stones in turn, only to have our meetings broke up, our secrets leak out, and our best-laid plans nolle prossed into the worst. Then the colonel tricked out this cave that's on his own land. As I say, it serves right neatly except in wet weather, when it's sort of drippy for those as——"

"For dry dusters," he obliged.

Not at all oppressed was Parker by the obligation thrust upon him. Although obvious from the first, the mistake in his identity made by both wets and dries had been proclaimed only tacitly. To both

factions had he asserted the truth about himself and his mission, in so far as this concerned outsiders. Since they persisted in believing him a secretively disposed revenue officer, there to advance the cause of the United States against illicit distillation, surely the joke was more on them than on him.

Possible risks of the false situation he had been given cause already to consider, as at the moment attested by the pain of a scraped knee-cap and wrenched shoulders. But always had he rather liked risks. The efforts of those certain four hands to run him out of Dismal Gap on the very day of his entrance had enlivened a period of disappointment. Further "harassment" might prove equally diverting.

Only one real interest had he in forcing upon incredulous minds the truth about himself—and that an interest at variance with the ultimate object of his exile. As a suspected revenueur, he need hope for no moonshine beams. No boot-legger would exchange the "poison" he craved for his hands full of jingling coin. The neediest blockader would scorn him entirely as a customer.

But philosophy of a reluctant sort approved the very difficulties of acquisition. The less he got, the better for him. The harder earned the drink, the finer its flavor. The more difficult the task, the greater his strength. And how would he prove his own "orneriness" if triumph came easily over those who had attempted to ship him off in the stage without consignee?

His determination to find some sort of a refuge for himself well back in the mountains had been only reenforced by Asa Simm's denial of any vacancy,

and was directly responsible for his presence at to-night's secret meeting of the league. The Plotts had met his inquiry with the hope that some of the faithful might be able to suggest. Besides, they wished him to make acquaintance with the stalwarts who stood back of the "cause" without delay.

"Shall we come to order?" Colonel Dryden was inquiring, having taken a stand behind the deal table.

Compliance with this request seemed to consist in a general selection of box or bench and a collapse thereon. Additionally, the minister fumbled in the pocket of his rusty frock coat, produced a rolled manuscript, started to prepare his voice by guarded hawking.

Suspicious of the boxes, Parker lowered his long frame upon a bench from which he had seen the goodly farmeress arise on his entrance.

It was when the preacher arose and rustled open his roll, his face stern with the determination to do his oratorical best, that the chairman proposed the postponement of the evening's paper on "Their Curse; Our Cause" in favor of the business of their guest of honor. Without bothering to put his suggestion to vote, the colonel, who retained other traces than his title of participation in the Civil War, launched into an address of welcome to their "be-sotted" neighborhood, in which he declared himself to be voicing the sentiments of all there present.

"Mr. Parker, suh," he insisted, might rely upon the full support of the league in any emergency. Let him remember that—in *any* emergency.

Into the opportunity of his pause for breath Aunt Hootie thrust herself with the statement of the need of their heaven-sent for an earthly habitat, where he

might live and have his being, whilst plying the arts that were to permit the glorious undertaking of "his real work" in their midst.

Parker was about to disown publicly the mission already denied in private, when regard for his own interests bade him wait. Dryden was making good his promises of help by mention of a shack which he owned on Fallaway Rim. It was at Mr. Parker's disposal from that very minute, *suh*. Of course it would seem a most unworthy habitation for one accustomed to the modern conveniences of a great metropolis; but at least it was advantageously located for the pursuit of his "private operations on the public behalf."

Before the offer was half put, Parker had decided the moment unpropitious for further betrayal of his object in coming to the Blue Ridge country. Truly, those who knew his past in the great metropolis might consider him engaged in private operations on the public's behalf!

With as fulsome a manner as he could command in the emergency, he professed himself glad to accept the cabin, sight unseen, in exchange for a proper rental. He was not particular as to modern conveniences, he protested, and, as Colonel Dryden had said, the location was everything. His thought that this might include the gleam of that copper hair whose rare shade he wished to reproduce on canvas, as well as the wherewithal to celebrate his achievement, once accomplished, he did not feel morally bound to express.

To Dryden's rather dubious query as to whether he was, by chance, superstitious, he laughed reassurance. Always had he considered thirteen his lucky

number; he had been born on a Friday, had grown some prize rubber plants, invariably walked beneath any handy ladder, never had stooped to pick up a horseshoe or even a pin pointed his way; was wearing, as a matter of fact, a cat's-eye scarf holder at that very moment. No, he wouldn't call himself superstitious.

The colonel expressed relief. Mr. Parker would not, then, object to the Rim shack's chief peculiarity, its provision with two doors, back and front, but no windows. The builder, too, had flouted superstitions, especially the one that to enter by one door and exit by another was likely to bring undesirable visitors.

To the secretary's suggestion that the eccentric architect might not have heard of the adage, he divulged regretfully that the former owner had lived in daily expectation of such advent, having been an illicit trafficker. The back door had been provided as an antidote to the front. But at that, both were needed for light and ventilation. In other respects the cabin would prove satisfactory. It was well chinked, with not a sawed board showing that he could remember, and boasted a puncheon floor and a stone fireplace that really "drew."

These details Parker waved aside with the assurance that the cabin sounded to be, on the whole, what he wanted. He gracefully accepted the colonel's offer to send his "nigger" to the Hotel Plott directly after breakfast next morning to act as guide and manage a pack-mule for his baggage.

The Southerner had launched into apology for the laziness of the black, with which Parker would have to contend, when there came startling interrup-

tion to this supposedly secret meeting of the Dust Dry League.

"Plumb worthless—that nigger Cotton Eye," he had complained. "I sent him here to-night to open up our meetin' place and fill and light the lamp, natu'ly expecting he'd stay around to see what else a black man could do for us whites. But what do you reckon he does, suh? Sneaks off home to commune with Morpheus. If this only was before the war, suh——"

It was at this point that the interruption came.

The lamp chimney fell apart with a clatter; the light went out; some missile thudded against the wall behind the speaker's chair.

CHAPTER VII

RAZZLE-DAZZLE

THERE followed a development so weird as to suppress even the incipient shrieks of the lady leaguers. In irregular letters of fire across the rock wall appeared this erratically printed screed:

BeWarE!!
D. RUM
 wiLl
 HaVE
 hiS
 WaY.
DuSt drY
 yoU-alL
 Will BE
 WhEn
 GaBrIeL
 fiNds
 yoU
HeRe.

"The handwriting on the wall!" murmured Aunt Hootie in an unwontedly smooth, awed voice.

"*Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.*" The sonorous quotation could come only from him who had a ministerial right to such. "Weighed in the balance——"

"But we-all can't have been found wanting." The protest against further translation came out of the darkness in the wheeze of Hezekiah Plott.

"Weighed nothing—not this hefty crowd!"

The evening's guest got to his feet, struck a match and applied it to the wick of the globeless lamp. Holding that as a torch, he advanced to examine the supernatural sign.

"Just as I thought!" he exclaimed. "The wets around here seem to have soaked their humor in grog. They're just playing a trick on you with the aid of some luminous paint—a pigment of calcium sulphite mixed, I should say, with mastic varnish. At any rate, that combination absorbs light when exposed thereto, and emits it in darkness."

In support of this theory, the lamp wick flickered smokily, then steadied. As its light increased, the phosphorescent warning dimmed.

Aunt Hootie also brightened under the logical explanation, which swept away her heart-stopping fear that the futility of the league's past efforts had brought upon them the displeasure of the Almighty.

"You say, colonel, that you sent Cotton Eye here to open up," she suggested. "Could he have perpetrated this shameful thing?"

"No, ma'am—reading and writing are beyond that black," said Dryden. "To-night's demonstration means chiefly that those pestiferous wets have discovered our meeting-place. Some one must have paid an early visit here and daubed yonder wall with the paint which Mr. Parker, suh, describes. It meant nothing to the nigger when he saw it in the dark and, as the light was burning when we gathered, we did

not notice it. What put out the lamp puzzles me; we heard nothing that——”

A roar from outside silenced all lesser voices. There came a rush of air from the tunnel-like passage. The flicker of the unprotected wick was again extinguished. There followed the sound of falling rock.

“It is the end—dust dry to dry dust!”

A woman’s wail filled Cal Parker’s ears, even as a quantity of agitated femininity was thrust into his arms. Considering the fact that he had moved only the moment before to set down the lamp on the table, the one unprotected female present, fair in sex if not in *tout ensemble*, had executed a well-calculated leap in the dark. Truly the new rôle thrust upon him had responsibilities!

“The demons of rum have entombed us; let us pray!” proposed the parson.

“Isn’t there something written about prayer being more effective with an admixture of work?” Parker made objection.

Still obliging with one arm the spinster who, if she had not really swooned, was a limp enough characterization of one who had, he groped forward until he located a bench. Upon it he deposited her. Another match relighted the wick and again dimmed the wall-letters of fire. With the lamp held before him, he entered the passage to investigate.

As he stooped for the short tunnel, his foot caught in something upon the floor and he narrowly escaped a fall. On examination, he found the stumbling block to be the end of a two-inch iron pipe. Its suggestion cheered him greatly. The wets did not intend, then, to go the whole route with this, their

latest grog-soaked trick, else they scarcely would have taken the precaution to assure a supply of air to those entombed by the powder explosion.

Doubtless, they meant thoroughly to frighten the members of the league from further efforts against their traffic in the quenching of the human thirst. Perhaps they intended to claim credit for digging out the victims after the warning on the wall had been blotted indelibly on their hearts.

But this discovery he could not share with those behind, since the air was over-burdened with ministerial supplications, well under way.

Within the tunnel, he found that, although the exit had been sealed by the recent blast, the litter of rocks and shale extended only a few feet. The explosive must have been placed inexpertly, its force thrown outward. Unless removal of the obstruction should cause a fresh slide, it looked possible to claw out a passage.

"If one of you worthies will get a leave of absence from the Lord—will wriggle in here and hold the light for me," he shouted back into the chamber, "I've an idea you won't need to pray."

There came response from the farmer of increasingly melancholy look. Parker drew on a pair of gloves for the protection of his uncalloused hands, before attacking the barrier. He moved the larger rocks and passed them behind him, the while scooping back the shattered shale. Soon he was able to execute a hole large enough for the passage of his lank frame.

"Out again!" he congratulated himself as he straightened up in the open gully, much as he had done after his recent wriggle from the stage.

The passage would have to be enlarged for the rescue of Dr. Hezekiah, the colonel, and the farmer's wife; the others could crawl through at once. Some one acquainted with the neighborhood could then go for tools stronger than gloves in ribbons and fingers blood-stained. Through the opening he wirelessly transmitted this order of procedure to his volunteer, who in turn transmitted it to those in the chamber.

Aunt Hootie came first, bewailing the fact that she had not been handicapped with embonpoint instead of the spouse whose services to the mortal mouths of men she valued even higher than her own to their eternal souls. The secretary had been jolted into recovery from her swoon by discovery of the damage done her best "meeting dress." The Brand scorched through on the heels of her indignant exclamations. Then came the parson with the news that the farmer would not leave his farmeress. With even more vigor than he had put into the plea for Divine help, he departed on the run toward the Dryden homestead for pick, shovel and possible assistance.

In half an hour after the good man's return with Cotton Eye Lee, for once available when needed, the opening was large enough to emit the heaviest of the "stalwarts." Colonel Dryden, as befitted so substantial a leader, was last to materialize and with him brought the query interrupted by the blast.

"I want to ask you eye-witnesses of this razzle-dazzle, what put out that lamp? If there had been any report of gun-fire, now, or if——"

"I distinctly heard the thud of a bullet against the wall," interrupted Dr. Hezekiah.

68 FLAMES OF THE BLUE RIDGE

Again Cal Parker essayed practical explanation of the seemingly miraculous.

"There's a chap up New York way named Maxim who makes a silencer for rifles and revolvers. Do you folks happen to know whether any of the Dismal wets has invested in one?"

All chins wagged in the negative; then soon the farmer's dropped to his chest and a standstill.

"There's one fellow loafering hereabouts," admitted he in deepening melancholia, "who has done boasted how he's got his repeater 'charmed' for slicks and like pests. A silencer—do you-all reckon that could be what's charmed Rex Currie's gun?"

So, Parker commented in thought. The handsome hillbilly again! Being somewhat contentious himself, he must watch for a way more forceful than self-protection to retaliate.

CHAPTER VIII

POPPER OF POPSKULL

RATHER early for him next morning, Parker was tramping the declivities and twists of a rutted, ocher road that led into the mountains. Ahead, urged by intermittent prods from a stick manipulated by his black guide, plodded an equally black mule, laden to pack-a-back capacity with luggage and a supply of provisions sufficient to last several weeks. The Gap, seething to its village limits from the excitement of the evening before, lay a few miles behind; their destination, an unoccupied hill cabin, several ahead.

The newest perplexity of the many that had complicated his reception at Dismal was the morning's inexplicable change in the demeanor of Cotton Eye Lee. From their first step out of the village, the negro had made plain his aversion to entering upon the expedition. His manner bore not a distant-cousinly relationship to that of the day before. He was silent to taciturnity, his ill-assorted eyes shifting uneasily from road to brush, from survey of the back-track to an even closer scrutiny of the green velour shadows along the road ahead. No tinkle of coin in the pocket, no bait of improvised verbal monstrosities that must have been strange to his ears, humanized his mood.

"What do you suspect is after us, Cotton?" Parker once demanded.

"It ain't that I'm scared none, cap'n, but I can't seem to help a omnitious feeling that this here ain't no expedition for a thirsty nigger."

The panorama slowly unwinding diverted the color-convert. Indeed, Spring was holding a camp-meeting in the Blue Ridge! New green was the text, majestically read from the roofs of pines and chestnut-oaks, from the walls of ferns, from the anterooms of the stream which showed dimly now and then. The hymns were announced and sung in sudden bursts of clustering pink azalea, in whole gardens of white-centered iris, in the sun-touched, ghost-white flowers of the sour-wood tree, in the flash of a pair of cardinal birds that streaked like the spirit's cry from tree to tree—in the chats, finches, and tanagers that fluttered their throats in one universal pæan. Prayer—staying, serious, the groundwork of the service—was the red clay underfoot.

Truly a soul-reaching evangelist this to whom Spencer Pope had sent him! Yesterday the hue of the ground had filled the sinner with irritation; to-day, modulated by the aromatic dimness of the woods, it soothed him, seemed symbolic. He would pursue the red path, yes; but a dull red path, toned down to comparative sobriety by the temperate colors in the heart of the hills. As soon as he could locate the proper fountain he would store his cabin on the mountain rim with the liquor which hitherto had been his enemy, there to make it his friend.

Such pleasing thoughts were interrupted by the necessity of hurrying after his guide from where he had loitered at the crossing of the watercourse.

The negro stood as a bizarre forefront figure against a Japanesque background of slimy pines, festooned with cones. Patently, he was unconscious of the picture he made, uncaring as to the background. He was staring down at a green, fresh-cut branch lying in the exact center of the road.

The intensity of his expression, his manner of rolling his eyes, the saliva that trickled, unheeded, from the corners of his mouth—all aroused curiosity.

"Never see laurel before?" asked Parker. "What's so startling about this specimen?"

The acquisitory gleam of the day before showed in the black face.

"Specimen—specimen," he muttered.

A certain relief came to Parker that he could still tempt the guide with tidbits from his vocabulary.

"Yes," he urged. "What is so confounding about this tenuous offshoot of the *Rhododendron maximum*?"

"Cap'n, this here ain't no specimen, no more than its a maximum offshoot." Cotton Eye's voice was husky. "This here, if you-all insist on amplification—this here is a sign!"

"A sign—sign of what?"

"Yes, sir, plain as chalk letters on a school-board. It's a kind of prognostication that"—up and down the road he glanced before finishing in a rasped whisper—"that soothing sirup be located in the near-by, close-up proximity."

As the stranger showed only continued inquiry, the negro insisted.

"Soothing sirup—can't you'uns get me, noway? The sign works like this: you trapse into the brush

the direction she points; then maybe you come upon another slip of laurel and trapse the direction *she* points; then maybe another and another. By and by you meets a man that's got something you-uns wants and you——"

"You mean——"

"Popskull!"

In Parker's interruption had been gasped more of hope and fear than the ebony informant could have been expected to understand. The single word of whispered reassurance, therefore, called forth a spasm of joy like that which Rex Currie had interrupted the day before. Higher and higher chortled his voice, startling the birds, seeming to breeze the trees. Dimly conscious of his guide's word-laden protests, he paid no heed.

"I specimen you-all had best shut up. 'Twon't get you nothing, telling the whole world your pleasure-ables. Land sakes, cap'n, if you-uns don't quiet down, we'd best be throwing mud outen here! It ain't safe, I tell you, for a stranger to be projecting around a sign."

Cotton Eye glanced apprehensively up the mountain road, then: "Linky day, now we're done for! If it ben't Old Tom Metcalf himself, and looking pizener than a snake! He's done hearn you—he's seen us at the sign!"

Three of the warning words, rather than the urgency of their tone, silenced Parker. Already he was interested in Old Tom Metcalf.

"Howdy. Might I ask where be you-all heading?" Their discoverer put the deep-voiced question.

"You might."

Young to old, the humor, the succinctness, the curiosity were returned.

This man, Parker reminded himself, was the immediate forbear of the girl named for a mountain. He saw a supertype of mountaineer, of height and weight that spoke for great strength. Although looking the redoubtable Metcalf of his reputation, he was unpretentiously garbed in the denim overalls of the region, suspended by a single gallus; a calico shirt lay open over his hairy chest; his black slouch hat was pulled down to the line of his bushy white brows.

Across the hollow of his left arm a repeating rifle rested with a suggestion of readiness. The hand that gripped its butt was brown, knotted, powerful.

One glance at his face—tufted around the ears with thick, tawny hair—and the rest of him was taken for granted. Unusual in that it was shaved of beard or mustache, its characteristics showed boldly—blue, quizzical eyes; a straight, clear-cut nose; jaws square in their set; mouth wide and flexible, at the moment twisted in a smile somewhat grim.

"I have rented a cabin for the summer on what they call Fallaway Rim," Parker was saying. He gestured toward the perturbed black, who had retreated to the side of the grass-cropping mule, as if to a haven. "Cotton Eye Lee, here, is my guard of honor."

"Mighty dry company you've picked, and not overburdened with honor, yon nigger. I know him—he pretended once to work on my place."

"He was picked for me," continued Parker, with a grin for the fullness of his meaning. "But he

returns to the Gap as soon as he has honored and guarded me to my destination."

"And you, stranger, what did you say your name was?"

Parker had not said and knew it, so he supplied the information.

"From out North, be you?"

"Direct from Manhattan Island. I came to hunt—well, several things."

The mountaineer completed his survey of the other's person, then turned with an estimating expression toward the pack carried by the mule.

"I reckon," he returned. Pausing, he lifted his eyes to sweep the mountain range of balds and domes, knobs, and ridges. "You'll likely find hunting dangerous, unless you've done learned our game laws. I'm a hunter my own self, but no poacher."

Parker took a forward step and spoke directly: "I've never been called a poacher, either, and so far I've kept out of jail. My hunting will be confined to things I'm entitled to."

"It's better that way, Mr. Man. See to it you ain't prejudiced none in your own favor."

"I'd have to be some prejudiced," laughed Parker, "to withstand a certain local frankness which has jolted me repeatedly ever since the stage dumped me into a muddy ditch. It was your daughter, by the way, who graciously dragged me out."

"Verney? She didn't mention it to home."

The curt return was accompanied by a truth-probing look from under the frowning brows.

"Our meeting was rather unconventional. Possibly she does not consider me a legitimate acquaintance, but I continue to feel very much in her debt.

You are to be congratulated, Mr. Metcalf, on having such a humane and handsome daughter."

Although Parker's speech was advised by previous experience with proud parents and spoken sincerely enough, it seemed to be unfortunate. The old man's scowl deepened and he was about to depart in displeasure. Almost did he tread upon the laurel "sign." But in time he turned.

"Verney is Verney yerabouts," he said, "and ain't pleased by common praise from strangers. You-all had best be right careful that the game you hunt wears fur, fin, or feathers. Else, you won't be safe nohow or even comfortable!"

With no ceremony of farewell, not even a backward glance, Tom Metcalf strode by the trail whence he had appeared back into the woods.

The man from "out North" felt that his number had been taken. He stood staring after the Ridger, pondering new words of warning.

Only fur, fin, and feathers was he permitted to hunt by the unwritten law of the region; otherwise he'd be penalized for poaching!

His mind was seeing the tint of copper tresses, the pure lines of a profile cameoed against plush shadows. Yonder lay the twig upon the road, a character of a sign-language. It recalled certain gypsy *patterans* which he had encountered on a long-ago walking trip through Brittany. It pointed away from yesterday and the *anti* fervor of Aunt Hootie, with her medicine dropper and eye-cup.

His glance was drawn from it at the suggestion of Cotton Eye Lee, who had approached in apologetic manner, now that the cause of his retreat had retreated.

"He's done warned us-uns—Old Tom himself, the most prodigious popper of popskull in the whole of both the Carolinas!"

But in the very moment of tacit submission, a certain Bacchanalian protested; so did an artist religious. Both bore the same name—Calvin Parker.

Still regarding the twig, in fancy selecting the tubes he would squeeze for that truly wondrous shade of Titian hair, the "furriner" finished his interrupted laugh.

"Glory be!" He borrowed expression from her of the dropper. "I've just discovered something about myself, Cotton; I'm a poacher at heart."

CHAPTER IX

FLAME-FLARES

IF, in view of his reception by "the Gappers" or the attitude toward him of that active member of the wets met on the road, Calvin Parker wondered that he was allowed to settle unmolested in the shack on Fallaway Rim, he would have been enlightened by occurrences in the home of the Metcalf's the night of his arrival.

Their dwelling was called a "house," in distinction from regional cabins, because of its size and the luxury of separated rooms. It stood for the "quality" of former generations of Metcalfs. Back a safe hillside distance from Roaring Fork, a stream which occasionally lived up to its name, it had an impregnable look. A wide "stoop," furnished with flower boxes, a hammock, and several chairs of home construction, lent it an air of modernity that obscured its hewn-log, mud-plastered construction.

The road of approach was flanked proudly by ancient oaks. From the back yard, on the far side of the stream, rose imposingly the Vernaluska Mountain, after which the only daughter of the present line had been baptized, better known locally as "Grumbly Bald," because of certain internal rumblings which, at epochal intervals, had scolded from the crevasses and fissures that marked its top like the lines on an aged face.

The reluctant dusk of the Blue Ridge had fallen. Vernaluska Metcalf had lit the kindlings of the "parlor" fire which usually cheered the social hour of their day, and now sat in a low rocking chair to "tend" the sparks. Upon the upper of her crossed knees rested a mountain-made dulcimer; in her fingers was a goose quill, with which she began to pick an African melody from the strings, humming softly as she played.

The tune gained in erraticism from her mood, for her mind was not upon it. She did not consciously hear the noise of steel against thick china which told her that her father was finishing a belated supper in the kitchen. Neither did she feel interruption in the rattle of dishes and pans that bespoke the "redding up" passion of the household autocrat, "Miss Emmy" Worth, her dead mother's sister.

More eccentric grew Vernaluska's tune through the necessity of stamping out the sparks coughed from the fire across the wide hearth; more luminous glowed her hair, as if borrowing light from the blaze. But her face did not lighten.

It was set from weariness and worry. All day, through the arduous tasks which fell to her share—from the early morning churning, the weekly "once over" of the house, the preparation of the noontime, principal meal, the milking of the cow—she had been debating a point of policy. To-night she must argue it to a successful conclusion before the domestic circle.

Grave doubt teased her mind whether the silence of last evening regarding the new arrival at Dismal Gap had been advisable. Should she not have put her men folk on guard by reciting full details of the

overturned coach and later appearance of the stranger at the post-office? Might not her reticence precipitate any possible overt act of result, rather than curb it?

The recent confirmation of the authority of the drys by the ballot she realized to have made two distinct, opposing cliques within the family. One was a triumvirate, composed of her father, who was intolerant of any opposition to his without-the-law traffic; of Sandyred, her equally dynamic younger brother, and of Rex Currie, in himself not the least of her problems. Miss Emmy didn't count; she just "suffered along" in life, leaning the way of the strong. So that the other clique was herself—a self rapidly hardening in resolve to conquer the three, her unwitting enemies.

"Your pappy will be the death of me yet; he don't never do a sensible thing if he can holpen it." This plaint from the door recalled her to the moment.

"What's he done now, Miss Emmy, beyond being late to supper?"

"And what's likely more important to him, he'll be the death of himself," the good woman continued. "He's sopping—been in the Fork again, I suspect. He won't change for me."

"Well, he will for me."

Rising, Vernaluska laid the dulcimer on the mantel and started for the kitchen. There, she spoke to her redoubtable forebear after a way of her own, as if he were a bad boy subject to her control.

"Thomas, why can't you keep out of the Fork? 'Pears to me you get worse behaved every day. Don't you know that rheumatism is one powerful

affliction? Get on your Sundays at once and come sit up to the fire!"

"The idee of wasting fuel in the hearth, with spit-fire Verney around!" chuckled the old man. "But don't worry. I'll be with you directly."

The girl returned and lit the oil-lamp on the center-table. By this illumination she glanced appreciatively around the room, whose adornments attested resource and labor which she of their accomplishment alone knew.

The walls were papered, yes; certainly a distinction, if only in such newspapers as had come within her reach. Forming a frieze just below the ceiling were press illustrations cut out and pasted with infinite care. Here and there were well-balanced groups of pictures—the head of a handsome woman who, for reasons better known to the outside world than to Vernaluska, had achieved notoriety; a scene of a city street during the "rush" hour, a wrecked ship, a burning building—what not.

Softening the outline of the windows was draped a meshlike fabric of tiny pine-cones, strung and knotted together in a unique, hand-made design. Cushions, fat from goose feathers or pungent balsam and covered with a regard for the association of colors that deserved better material, lent ease to chairs and benches.

On one end of the table, beside a closed violin-case, squatted a brown earthenware bowl full of pussy-willows. Conspicuous upon the mantel, through its graceful shape, stood a tall jug of the same crude material.

To this the girl's eyes swerved, upon it lingered with an expression of critical admiration. Taking a

ruler from the table drawer, she stood off, squinted her eyes for perspective, began measuring the up-turned handles of the jug, as painters do drawings on canvas.

Soon her father emerged from the chamber which he occupied with the boys, duly attired in "store" pants and slippers.

"Sandy's slow-moving to-night. Not through his barn chores yet?"

"I reckon not, Tom."

"And Rex?"

To this Miss Emmy supplied answer with manifest resentment: "Rex must have found business good in Dismal Gap to miss two whole days' victuals."

For a moment the patriarch stood blinking back at the fire of hickory logs. His tuftlike brows drew together in a frown. Evidently the slow blaze of it did not please him, for he strode over to the fuel box, rummaged among its contents, selected several lengths of wood more to his liking. After placing these upon the burning hickory, he drew up the huge, sway-back chair of home construction sacred to his occupancy.

With a look of expectation, he awaited the effect upon the fire of his addition. Soon a sputter of sparks shot out, to be gulped in the colorful flames for which linwood is remarked.

The old man leaned forward, dropped his leonine head into his two huge paws, again emitted his odd, deep-throated expression of approval. He seemed not to hear the porch door open and shut, so diverted was he.

"Oh, you beauties of blue flames!" he muttered.

"You-all have the color for me, the life, the light!"

Irritated, Miss Emmy seized the hearth-broom—a bundle of wild sedge wrapped with wire to the end of a stick—and began to ply it against the sparks.

"You do make a power of work, Tom Metcalf, just when Verney's got the house broomed up! Why you can't do with a hickory burning is what I don't never see."

The recalcitrant made no defense. He stretched his hands clutchingly toward the lively light; continued to chuckle and to mutter.

"Once I could get you-all fast in my grip—once I could feel the burn of you on my palms! Why run you-all so fast up the chimney, blue flames?"

Sandyred, who had entered, flung his hat over a wooden peg and crossed to the group. He stopped behind his parent's chair; listened, waggled his head in the midst of a deep-drawn sigh. His glance swerved, as if at a word, to meet that of his sister. Her face, also, was drawn with anxiety; but soon pride in her handsome brother won him a smile.

At nineteen, Thomas Metcalf, Jr.—known best along the ridge by his descriptive nickname—had the fully developed figure of a man grown and a height of six feet one. His coloring, like the girl's own, hair as well as skin and eyes, was a direct inheritance from "Old Tom" who, in turn, had inherited it from former Old Toms of the Metcalf line. The chief present difference was due to the fact that the erstwhile auburn of the parent's hair and brows had become so admixed with the white of advancing years that it was lightened almost to the color of hemp.

Already the son's face was showing lines around

eyes and mouth—hard lines that bespoke the strain of the vocation into which he had been pressed. A certain alertness of glance and movement that could scarcely have come from nerves in one of such superb physical condition suggested long acquaintance with danger, a consequent habit of the defensive.

The old man looked up. "Throw on some more linwood, Sandy. It's warming to the heart—lights up the hope of them that gather round."

The younger added several of the swift-burning sticks and stood watching the reflected animation on his father's face, rather than the conflagration itself.

"Ho, there, you flames, one day you-all will be mine—*mine!* I'll find you yet, for certain sure."

Again brother and sister exchanged troubled glances. This predilection for the linwood flare, these more or less incoherent comments were no new thing. But of late they appeared to be obsessing the mountaineer, so mentally solid on other subjects. For long the two had united in a campaign of counteraction, a policy of pointing the prosaic, as it were.

Miss Emmy, however, had not their patience. Nearly the same age as Old Tom, eminently sane, she frequently vented her irritation, as now.

"Ain't it time you trapped that field-mouse what's using in your head, Tom Metcalf?" she snapped. "'Pears to me it's gnawing your brains worse each and every day. If you can explain this blue-flame jabber, don't it stand to reason you'd best do it and ease off your mind? Maybe so we'd help you find them. What are they, anyhow, that you want to burn your hands? Why do you hope to grip them? What will it profit you if you do? If you can't explain——"

"How be you feeling this evening, Missy Em?" interrupted Sandyred.

"Porely, thank God!" Despite her devout expression, the spinster frowned rebelliously into her nephew's warning glance. Sandyred was her especial joy in life, even as was Vernaluska Old Tom's, although the expression of her worshipful attitude toward him was guarded and oftentimes deceptive.

It was accepted as a family fact, however, that he alone could curb her mania for reforming the persons, as well as the properties, of the household, could file down the saw-toothing of her corrections. Now she jerked a vehement up and down of the chin to his silent hint.

Old Tom turned restlessly in his chair. "Do us," he suggested, "one of your mimics—the revivalist."

The youth, always glad to entertain with the chief of his talents, was more than ready to-night. To coax his father's thoughts back to the normal concerns of life, to make him laugh and forget—this effort he long had shared with his sister in their home life.

Springing around the table, that he might use it as a pulpit, he struck an attitude, rounded his eyes, puffed his cheeks piously; then, after the florid manner of negro camp-meeting artists, began to exhort.

His ability at impersonation had been "born in him." When yet a toddler he had begun "taking off" the cock-sure turkey gobbler, the lost calf, the Jane mule disporting herself in the face of discipline. Later, his interests had enlarged beyond the barnyard, and he flattered the wild creatures of the woods with his emulation. His first teacher at district school, the circuit rider, his own father—none

escaped his genius as he grew older and contemplated human possibilities.

Independent of make-up or costume, with inimitable realism of fervor and dialect, he now invited their attention to the horrors of hell and the preference of paradise. He asked for confession of guilt from each in sepulchral tones; he pounced upon inaccuracies in their supposed defense with especial applications and startling violence; he convicted them separately and collectively; at last doomed them to eternity's taxing torments in the bottomless pit.

The severity of Miss Emmy's feelings had relaxed considerably by the dénouement. Old Tom was laughing like a boy.

"Be I black or white?" she demanded.

"Lead me to the mourner's bench," he implored.

Sandyred mopped the pleased look on his face as he sank back into a chair. When well in command of the superiority to praise which was an affectation of his nineteen years plus, he shifted the onus of entertainment to his sister.

"And now, Verney, leave us-all hear the rest of that story—you left off at the bottom of the column yon side the door."

The girl took the lamp and walked over to the indicated section of the wall. She mounted the chair which Sandy placed for her, found the place in the newspaper fiction. She and her brother selected their improvised wall-covering advisedly, its chief qualification being that no page of a tale need be turned—perforce an impossibility—to reach its climax and end.

This particular yarn, a syndicated thriller of the

West, had held them for several nights. In their honor code, improvised for the continuance of general interest, had been incorporated the rule that none might read for himself. Last night, as always, Vernaluska had cut off at a tense paragraph. Glancing down at the three expectant faces lifted in the fireglow, she saw that no reminder was necessary. She turned, focused the light, and began:

"Facing the leveled rifles of the rustlers, Tex Masters began to fear that the clutch of circumstance was at last to prove too much for him. He dared move neither hand to his holsters, for the dear sake of the girl astride the horse behind him.

"The hot, prairie wind blew her silken tresses against his cheeks and twined them, like loosened strands of the lariat of Fate, around his muscular neck. In that vital moment, on the threshold of death, he knew he would not have untwined them to save his life.

"*'I love you, Heart of Heaven,'* he murmured hoarsely. *'Whatever comes, remember only that I love you!'*

"A shot battered the brazen air. Hearing it, Tex calculated swiftly, then leaned instantly to the left. A grim smile twisted his sun-bronzed face, as a drop of blood splashed from the tip of his right ear upon his cheek.

"Amaze held his dare-devil spirit enchained, as he felt a swift movement at one elbow, then at the other. In the same split-second two steel points projected from under his armpits, clutched by two white hands. Two simultaneous, well-aimed shots barely anticipated the first forward plunge of their mount; then——"

At this point of interest the reading suddenly ceased. Vernaluska's light had blown out.

CHAPTER X

SAFETY FIRST

THE cause of the interruption was a gust from the opened door. Rex Currie strode into the room, to meet various ejaculations of resentment.

"You-all raised in a barn, Rex?" the old man roared.

"Such slush!" Thus Miss Emmy, but with a glance of exasperation at the disturber.

Sandyred contributed from the door, which he had closed:

"Even Verney never can learn you when you ain't wanted."

The hillbilly reflected their impatience.

"You-all needn't be so uncivil," he said, "when I'm bringing you news."

"Which ain't much good, I reckon, if it won't keep a spell," objected Tom. "The world wa'n't made in a day. If you don't slow down some, young feller, you'll project youself clean outen it. Light the lamp and read some more, Verney. I want to know if that there two-gun girl fetches her targets."

"You'll be hunting a target of your own when you've heard my news," the young man insisted, and produced a folded sheet of letter-paper from his pocket. "Let me help you down, honey. That's right—give me the lamp. Sit here by the fire and rest up."

The attentions to which Vernaluska submitted were not exactly usual in the Blue Ridge, but to be expected from Rex Currie. Although born and reared on the shank of Grumbly Bald, which lay just across the creek, he had "traveled" enough to wear off rough edges and take on a veneer of gallantry which went well with his sophisticated appearance.

With an impatient fling, he tossed the paper to the disgruntled patriarch.

"I know there ain't no crowding you, Tom, when you're not in a hurry; but you'd best put this letter next on the entertainment bill."

Impressed, Old Tom opened the note deliberately, jerked his chair around so that the light of the replaced lamp fell directly upon it, cleared his throat. But no sound crossed his lips, no shade his expression, to the end.

When he had finished, he turned, not upon the messenger waiting with ill-repressed excitement, as though for an explosion, but upon his own daughter.

"Verney," he inquired in a tone unusually mild for him, even when addressing her, "be there anything you-all have done gone and forgot to tell your pappy about your visit to the Gap yesterday?"

Vernaluska realized that the issue for which she had tried to prepare was at hand; also that, despite her effort at control, her face was coloring. But she replied straightaway:

"Maybe you're harking to the stranger I yanked out from under the stage?"

"Maybe I be. H-m! Why the tight lip on him?"

Currie's eyes flashed. "I suspicioned yesterday

she favored the dude; now I know it by the guilty look of her. He's the kind that even a woman can keep a tight lip about."

"Jealous again, Rex?" was Sandyred's boisterous demand. "You're better at fiddling than hiding your feelings. What's in the letter, pap?"

The girl paid no attention. Her father's searching eyes still held hers, and she answered his standing question quietly.

"I calculated it wouldn't do any good to tell."

Again the old man cleared his throat, this time to read aloud with a regard to detail that included the rubber-stamped heading of the sheet:

"DISMAL GAP POST-OFFICE AND EMPORIUM.

"Asa Simms, Prop.

"Dismal Gap, North Carolina.

"DEAR TOM:

"This will inform you that the spy the drys sent Up North for is arrived and on the job. Come in on the stage yesterday, and made a bee-line for Plotts's. According to the prattle of Aunt Hootie, he was selected by Spencer Pope, who, in my humble opinion, is the slickest revenuer we ever drove out of the Carolinas. I spotted this new one quick as a flea, and served notice on him to leave. When he didn't scare, Rex and me had a lively idea of sending him out as a bundle, but don't ask how that worked out. Rexey gets all heated up when the fizzle is mentioned.

"They held a session over the champeen detector last night—Dryden, the Plotts, and others of the pestiferous. Somebody interrupted the party with a practical demonstration of how it feels to be burried alive; but even that did not give their star guest the going-away-from-here hunch. This morning he headed out into the hills with the nigger that used to fetch for you. Claims to be an artist, here for his health, and a sickly looking object he is. I don't need to

remind you that it ain't healthy out your way. Short shrift is the advice of,

"Yours fraternally,

"A. SIMMS.

"P. S.—As your Verney had first sight of the dressed-up two-yards-of-impudence, she can tell you, even if Rex won't just what he looks like.—A. S."

Before the last word of the postscript all eyes had swerved to the daughter of the house.

"'Pears to me you'd oughter have mentioned it some last night," said her brother. "What's the spy-critter like?"

"She was looking sugar at him when I happened on them," Currie interpolated. "Likely she's setting up to——"

"Likelier she aint!" The old man's eyes glared bluer than the blue burn from the hearth. "You boys leave off pestering Verney to remember things she's seen fitten to forget. This ain't no business for the women folks nohow. Anything you-all want to know about the scum—ask me."

"You, Tom? Have you seen him? When? Where?"

Vernaluska put the queries to her sly-smiling forebear with such eagerness that a shadow off Rex Currie's frown settled on Sandyred's face.

The old man's glance warned the younger pair.

"I met up with him this morning, headed for Dry Dryden's shack on Fallaway, like Asa's letter says. He was dressed up sure enough, and appeared to be in a right smart humor with himself. He's got quite a content of nerve, considering; but we-all ought to make short work of him."

Sandy's face cleared. "Tol'able short, by grace!"

he laughed. "We'll trail him like his own soul and singe his nerve whenever he edges close up."

"Bump him off and be done with it, say I," contended Currie.

"First thing," Old Tom planned, with suppressed excitement, "is to get a holt on that no-good nigger, Cotton Eye. Never allowed I'd take him back, but we can't afford to have him running loose, with all he knows. You, Rex, ride down to Dismal early to-morrow morning and fetch him. He's afeared of you, so gaff him. He can do the chores around the place, freeing Sandy's time to——"

"Why not let me trail the spy?" interrupted Currie. "I'm considerable older than Sandy."

"Older, *but!*" Tom snorted, with frank depreciation. "'Pears you've had two chances and failed, so likely you'll keep cooler tending to business as I point it for you. I'll manage along without the boy, one way or t'other."

"And what of me, Pappy Tom? Why leave me plumb out of it?"

There was a general straightening as Vernaluska arose, crossed to the family law-giver, and put her demand.

Severally, from him, Sandy, Rex, even from prim Miss Emmy, voices lifted.

"You, my gal?"

"You're going to be left outen it, sis, if I've got any say."

"All Dismal's talking already about your mix-up with this dude."

"Have you-uns forgot how to be a lady, Verney Metcalf? Your mother would be turning in her grave, knew she your goings-on."

But the girl looked only at the patriarch.

"Ain't I part and passel of this firm, Tom? Ain't I got ability above milking cow-brutes? Can't I ride, see, shoot? Don't I know every blackberry-vine and 'dendron-bush from here to Fallaway? As for you, don't you need Sandy desperate to stand guard and spell you, stirring the mash over at the still?"

"What you aiming at, Verney?"

"Just this—let *me* trail the stranger."

Springing to his feet in a flare of protest, Currie seized her by the arm, forcefully tried to usurp her place before the old man.

But Vernaluska was not through, and held her ground.

"I'm the only one of us all that has time to find out if he really is the slick you suspect," she continued. "I'm not at all sure that he ain't what he says he is—a painter man, seeking health. He looked right peaked to me. Now that they've clapped the double-outlaw brand on our business we can't afford to be making unnecessary mistakes."

"I say no!" insisted Currie, as if prodded beyond endurance. "If we three men can't short-shrift one stray revenueur without calling on women folks, we're no good noway. I won't consent to Verney's mixing in on this."

She had a scornful look for his chivalry.

"Who asked leave of you?" she demanded.

"I tell you—all the girl's lightning-struck on the slick. Pulled him out of the mudhole single-handed, Tobe Riker says; washed his face and whisked the dirt off his fancy clothes. And in the store she led him on something indecent. It ain't to clear up

Sandy's time that she's offering; it's to see personal that he don't get punctured before she has a chance to enjoy some more of his fine manners. It's just that or Rex Currie never guessed the buried card."

"You've done guessed this one wrong—that's certain sure!"

Old Tom also got to his feet and wrenched off the grip of the boot-legger from his daughter's arm. Shaking from a dislike of Currie which had been noticeable frequently of late, he faced him.

"What right you got to any say-so about Verney?" he demanded. "Talk about this stranger's impudence—there's only one excuse for you. You're plumb liquored up doting on the girl."

Sandyred, with Miss Emmy's chirping caution at his elbow, had closed in on the group.

"That don't leave him outen apologizing all around for saying she favors a revenue spy," he declared with youthful bluster, his likeness to the old man more conspicuous than at any moment hitherto.

Vernaluska glanced from one angry face to another, then startled all by lifting her voice in laughter.

"So it's three bears we have in this house?" she commented. "You two leave off growling at the third. You're too hard on Rex. He'll apologize, I reckon, when I get time to listen. As for me, suppose you-all treat yourselves to a good long look at me"

She paused, threw back her head for the invited inspection. Her next demand was centered upon her father.

"Do I look like a Metcalf on the outside—or don't I? Do you calculate I'm soft-soap within?"

"You've always been smart-headed," he admitted, without grudge.

"Of course it ain't any credit to me if I am." She hastened to depreciate the compliment she had forced. "What for did you scrimp to send me two years across the mountain to school, if not to smarten up my head? You've got a better mind your own self, Tom Metcalf, and all I ask is for you to look at the case of this outsider. Whatever he be, dare we-all shoo him off the Ridge the rough way that, according to Asa's letter, has been tried twice and failed? How long do you reckon it would be before the law would crimp us? It's tightening these days—the law. What kind of success have the old methods had against it?"

It was just as well that she did not pause for answers to her questions. None seemed ready with return.

"'Pears to me you'd ought to take command, Tom. And you need a cool-calculating person to help you decide whether this young man really be revenuer or painter—a person more like me than Sandy or Rex. If you say after due investigation that he is a slick, then you and I will find some smarter-headed way of driving him out than by driving ourselves in against the wall. Come across, Tom; do I sound reasonable or not?"

"Dum reasonable."

His eyes alight with the gleam of admiration for his girl-child with which he had been listening and looking, the old fellow turned to the others of the group.

"Verney is right. I've done glimmed this for-
eigner over myself, and, like she says, he sure looks

the part he claims. There's no way to make certain sure he's the officer expected without waiting for another one to show up or for him to commit himself."

"But he's committed himself already," Currie interposed. "Didn't he head straight for the Plotts?"

"And didn't you tell me yourself Tobe Riker had recommended him there?" the girl asked crisply.

"But what of his bribing Cotton Eye first-off for information about where to get a drink, and his mulishness about staying where he ain't wanted and his being among them present last night at Dryden's cave?"

These exasperated demands Tom himself parried.

"Don't a'most everybody bribe somebody for a drink? As for mulishness, that's the best sign he's shown. And like as not it will turn out soon why and wherefore he attended that meetin'."

"Turn out?" Currie mocked the patriarch's mild tone. "When did you get into the doddering, turn-out class, Tom Metcalf? Like as not you'll get down to depending on Providence before long. You let us handle this spy the way we've started and it won't be a jiffy until——"

"Well, it will be a jiffy, say I!" Old Tom thumped the table to accentuate his roar. "Who gave you-uns leave to start, anyhow? Who's the leader of the wets yereabouts—me or Asa Simms? Who's got the most to lose? When you start off with another load of bumblings to-morrow, Rex, pass out the word that *I'm* watching this foreigner, and that I won't stand no outside interference."

The hillbilly's face crimsoned.

"You may be the real leader of the wets," he admitted, "and you sure have got the most to lose; but that don't entitle you to give me orders, as I can see."

"Maybe that don't, but you've entitled me your own self. Why have you hired out as my bootlegger if you ain't willing to take orders from me? It ain't likely, is it, now, that you could be nursing some other reason?"

"What other reason could I——"

"Then you pass out that word!" Tom threatened. "If I find that you hang around Dismal, you are chucked from this job, and out you go. We-all can't afford to have your trip postponed."

Rex Currie had taken himself in hand, and now shrugged his shoulders with the outward show of good nature that had made him so successful a retailer of blockade, quite as though he had not been surprised out of his very intention.

"Of course, Tom, if you say so——"

"And is it also settled," inserted the girl, "that I'm to trail the stranger until he proves himself one way or tother?"

"It is that—plumb settled!" Tom's tone was final, and he spared Currie a last antagonistic glare that closed further argument.

With appreciably less effort than she had expected, Vernaluska had won an important point in her campaign of safety first. She had persuaded her parent, the most rapacious wolf of the ridge where revenue suspects were concerned, to a most unusual course. Her suitor, under manipulation, not only had defeated his own ends, but actually had

helped hers by accusing her of an ulterior interest in the foreigner—let her thanks excuse him.

Yet now, as at other times, she suspected more in Rex Currie than appeared on the surface. She had seen him color, then turn pale. She knew his temper—consequently approved when he showed the ability to master it. But before to-night she had known him to appear pliant when his will was taut.

So it came about that Calvin Parker, of *the* Parkers, was granted regional reprieve by the mountain girl. So, also, it came about that Vernaluska Metcalf decided she might advisedly watch other than the stranger to justify her stand.

CHAPTER XI

TEETOTALERS TWO

SEVERAL adventures, fruitless so far as concerned his principal appetite, but bearing other consequences of moment, came heel-treading after Parker.

Aroused the first morning of his stay in the cabin by sunrays pouring through the open east door, he arose betimes and managed to feed himself through certain expedients of trail cookery almost forgot. Invigorated by a sleep such as he had not known in months, he found himself impatient to explore the vicinity of his new habitat.

Along a path that led into the "sticks" from behind the cabin, he swung with a certain pleasure in mere activity that left no room for offense at the slap of an occasional laurel. From the hard-pack of the trail, he decided that it must lead somewhere, although the overgrowth of blackberry vines, whose green runners clung to his boots, scratched his puttees, and twice tripped him almost to a fall, augered that it had not recently been traveled.

But "somewhere" was a definite enough place for the Calvin Parker of this morning. Somewhere, somehow, somebody—such indiscriminate expressions might have been used to describe his mood.

Determination to win against his enemy of circumstances had climbed into the saddle of his intention. Elbows spurred sides since there was no cup

of realization toward which to stretch his hands; parched tongue scourged palate as a quirt; tighter grew the cinch of his belt against the inner yearning for fiery draught.

After crossing the creek by way of a toppled tree foot-bridge, he struck into a mountain road on the other side, which seemed to point the way to some human habitation. As he plunged along through the mud, there came to him a new grasp of the Ancient Mariner's classic plaint:

Water, water everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.

But color, fire, and a horse-power "kick" must be the components of the water he craved. No twinge over good resolutions forsworn delayed him. He would make new ones afterward, he assured himself in an upsurge of amusement at his own expense—make many others, both new and good, and likely break them later, every one.

It wasn't himself, anyhow, who had proposed that he become a total abstainer; not he who had been most ashamed of that last ghastly night in New York. He had a chance now to prove that he was no weakling; that he could be the sort of man he liked to picture himself. No combination of friends against him—no, not even little Sylvia and Spencer Pope, motive powers of his exile—might settle his fate without his own decisive vote.

Come to look at the situation in this clear, strong light of the Carolinas, he owed it to himself and the Parkers of the past so to do. He would defy

all those gratuitous warnings; would wrest from the mountains the secret location of the spirituous enemy he was at last to make his friend; would pursue his self-respecting mission along a path of adventure.

In a forty-acre corn-field, he shortly came upon the humans promised by the road. Behind a bull-tongued plow, hitched to a wraith of a horse, a be-whiskered man was at work. His feet were encased in shapeless chunks of mud, his legs in jeans attached precariously to one suspender, his upper body in a hickory shirt.

Upon Parker's hail the native drew on the single rein of the wither-wrung beast for immediate inactivity. Evidently both welcomed any excuse for stopping work; at any rate, both gazed at the approaching interruption with vacuous eyes. They looked a good deal alike—weather-beaten, slab-sided, listless, hungry.

As the worker of the perpendicular farm seemed uninspired by any courtesy of meeting a stranger half-way, Parker advanced toward him over the uneven going and went through the form of scraping acquaintance with what heartiness he could command. But the man showed no joy in the fact that they were related in the sacred bonds of near-neighborship; the expensive Havana, proffered as an incentive to friendliness, he crumpled between both palms and used to replace a cud already in his mouth.

"Perhaps you can direct me to the best place for a chap with a full-grown thirst to stock his wine-cellar?" Parker approached the subject of his quest. "Now that the State's gone dry, they tell me I must apply directly to the mills of the gods. I've been

told, also, that several such are located nearby."

For a moment a gleam lit the countryman's dull expression, vitality sounded in his voice.

"So that's it? If you-uns be asking me personal where I gets mine—I does without. My woman don't cotton to no law-breaking on this here farm."

He jerked a thumb up the hill, over the knob of which an apparition in skirts had appeared.

"But if you-uns be set on liquor to drink," the plowman continued, "Bide Shortoff cal'lates you'd best follow that crossroad you came along so far as Roaring Fork—a likely two mile. You just might run acrost one or tother of them Metcalfs afore you reached their hangout."

With elation Parker grasped that the Metcalf place, at once the source of possible supply and the home of the girl with the remarkable shade of hair, was within walking distance. He delivered himself of hearty acknowledgement and recrossed the furrows to the road.

As he swung around the base of the hill, however, having literally accepted the advice to head for Roaring Fork, he found himself intercepted. Bide Shortoff's "woman" had slipslopped hurriedly across the side of the up-and-down corn-patch and now faced him, arms akimbo.

Parker doffed his fedora and waited for her to speak. Mentally he commented on what a fine example she looked of how much a married couple may grow in likeness from association—perhaps, rather, from the food and the work. She, too, was flat-sided, round-shouldered, weather-burned to a degree of monotone which included her hair, her lips, and the one-piece calico slip that garbed her.

"Where be your woman, young man?"

The query startled Parker, not only of itself, but also because of the musical, minor-key voice in which it was pitched.

"Madam——" During his hesitant reply the bucolic scene was obscured by a flash of Sylvia Brainard as he last had seen her, exquisite, reproachful, solicitous—"I hold no legal title to any one of the fair. Why do you ask?"

"Every he-critter had ought to have one looking after him. Stranger, you was asking Abide-with-me Shortoff where to find bumblings yerabouts?"

Again Parker was startled—startled and diverted. That "Abide-with-me" should be the "given" name of any benedick seemed at the moment worth his whole trip to the Blue Ridge. But there was distinct threat back of her mellifluous demand. Under spur of the moment, he decided upon dissimulation.

"As it happens, my chat with your husband carried no mention of bumblings, although I judge you're not often mistaken, Mrs. Shortoff."

"Whatsoever had it to do with—would you-all just as leave tell me?"

Parker glanced around for inspiration, saw a sleek-looking horse grazing in a green-splotched pasture lot.

"I am looking," he admitted, this time with the impressment of truth, "for a saddle-horse."

"And Bide sent you away?" The suspicion in her question was for him, not her husband.

"I suppose, madam, that he did not wish to part with any of the family horses. One becomes so attached to beasts about the home."

"You suppose? Well, *I* don't!"

That so much contemptuous derision could be expressed in her golden drawl seemed incredible. For a moment her gaze traveled with consideration from him to the green-splotched field.

"The only horse-brute on this farm that can be rid belongs to me," she said. "What you-all got to swap?"

"Nothing to swap," Parker apologized; "that is, nothing except cash."

"Nothing except cash? And you-all want a horse?"

From her hard expression he feared that she was going to refuse any consideration of his proposal, but she soon relieved him. Gripping his arm with a hand that trembled, she started him, with herself, across the uptilted corn-field toward the pasture lot.

"Come with me. Yan he stands, as fine a painted horse as ever seen the Blue Ridge."

Along the way she returned to her interrupted advice.

"Stranger, no matter where Abide-with-me Short-off told you to go for them bumblings, you-all light tother way. He's the most practised tempter in the sticks, if I do say it about my old man, as shouldn't. If so be it he's done directed you to Met-calf's, it's only to make trouble for all concerned. Old Tom's as contentious as a gun. He'll maybe plug you through for spying, and Bide for turning your nose toward Roaring Fork."

Despite the strength of her assertions, she revealed weakness in her closing threat. "And leave me tell you additional, young man, don't you never come back this way with no jug of bumblings to divvy with Bide, unless you want me to plug what's

left of you. When this here Carolina went dry, one pore sister made up her mind that one husband at least was going to cotton to the law. Fair warning, stranger!"

They had reached the horse, which looked a personable animal as he gave over grazing to contemplate them, his head held a little to one side. Well shaped and fed he was, and of distinctive markings: At once Mrs. Shortoff switched to the subject of his excellencies.

"Attend how lavish he is with white and red spots! And he's better than he looks, sound all through and well-mannered—as good a stob as you could find in a handful of miles."

"Suppose," suggested Parker, "that you talk it over with Mr. Shortoff and let me know by to-morrow what you will take for your horse."

Uneasiness showed in her manner. "Suppose I don't. Suppose you-all make up your mind here and now. Likely, once I got to cogitating on how much I think of this horse-brute, I'd plumb refuse to swap him for any of that cash you say you've got."

"In blunt terms, then, how much is he worth to you?"

The woman hesitated, looked distrustful of so ready an agreement.

"It ain't a matter of what he's worth to me. I 'spect you nor nobody would be agreeable to pay that. But if you haul me down to cash, I'm in need of fifty-nine dollars and fifty cents."

It was Parker's turn to be suspicious. Although he was not a practised horseman, the price seemed absurd—too low even for the sticks. What was wrong with the animal? He asked himself.

Walking over, he made a more thorough examination. There was no doubt that the beast was "plumb gentled," as the farm woman had assured him. Inspection of his hoofs showed no hint of split; his hocks were clean; there were none of the signs of glanders, in so far as Parker knew them. A sharp rap upon his rump sent him across the pasture at an easy, pain-free lope, testifying to no stiffness of joints. There seemed no reason to change first impressions.

The owner was close behind, deepening music in her drawl.

"Being as you-all are a furriner and just naturally afeared of getting burned, I'll make it an even fifty-nine."

Engaged in watching the movement of his prospective purchase, Parker made no reply.

"Bide's saddle and bridle ain't in no bad way," she added, "but the brute's done got kind of used to them, so I'll throw them in."

"He has a name, I suppose?" Parker asked, after paying her the cash.

"I *suppose* he has! You couldn't make him answer to no other if you tried a month o' Sundays. It is"—she paused from what soon proved to be inherent dramatic appreciation—"it is Teetotaler!"

Not until returning from a fruitless search along Roaring Fork did Parker indulge his sense of the ludicrous. In the midst of a laugh, however, he stopped because he was annoyed. Then, appreciating why he felt so, he resumed the laugh.

He, who had set forth so determinedly that morning to possess himself of a goodly supply of the

region's illicit brew, was hitting the back trail without it, astride an animal named Teetotaler!

For comfort he turned to congratulate himself on having out-hoss-swapped a Carolinian, when the return of the "critter's" stubborn propensity to veer toward the upside of the road interested him.

Soon suspicion replaced interest. Dismounting, he went to the horse's head, removed his hat, held it first before the right eye, then the left. The uphill one blinked, the other did not.

The sudden rage of the man who first realizes himself outwitted rushed through him who had received the benefits due a "furriner." So *that* was why Mrs. Shortoff needed only fifty-nine dollars and fifty cents—reason enough to cut off the centimes and throw in the worn equipment! *That* was why her horse grazed, while Bides' toiled before the plow! The mare, although a scarecrow for looks, at least could keep to the furrows!

As he rode farther, however, and found that bridle vigilance enabled the animal to hold almost in the center of the road, amusement dispersed rage. He must not blame the horse—none would prefer the misfortune. The whole circumstance was divertingly ironic. His new mount's name was Teetotaler, yes. But he was blind in one eye. He could not go straight!

CHAPTER XII

FROM AMBUSH

THE sensations of a sunrise awakening were new to Calvin Parker. He felt like a pioneer in some unexplored world as he strode to the front door and gazed at the nature study spread before him, bright-colored and moist, as from wet paint.

That his pinto and the squirrels were already astir filled him with a sort of indignation. Yet why shouldn't they be? Their precedent had dictated the hour of his retirement after supper last night when, tired by the carpenter's job of making horse-habitable the shed at the rear of the cabin, he had found that he could not read, could not even smoke.

But, this early morning, vigor swept through his veins, while thoughts to match breezed in his brain. He would demonstrate that his quest, which had seemed all-important the day before, could be forced into secondary place to-day. He would stay at home and paint during the morning, postponing his excursion into the Metcalf stronghold until afternoon.

A man should attend his work before seeking pleasure. Liquor, which he had allowed in the past to get the better of him, in the future should be a mere incident in his pleasure. "The mead that cheered"—cheer was its office rather than corruption.

He congratulated himself that moral strength was coming to him as rapidly as physical in this vital mountain air. He realized and pardoned as entirely justifiable a great pride in his self-control. It was only that which he had lacked all along.

After toasting these commendable sentiments in strong coffee, he planted Teetotaler's picket-pin in a plot of tall grass near by, then assorted the paraphernalia of his art. A goodly piece of canvas he cut from his roll and stretched upon a frame with four thumb-tacks. His easel was soon put together.

An hour after rising found him astride a folding-chair on the edge of Falloway Rim just to the left of the cabin. Without the restriction of a drawing, he was transferring the oils from palette to canvas in an impressionistic reproduction of the colorful scene. In it had become pictured his strong thoughts about himself; the dews, still dripping, baptized it "Early to Rise."

From the branches of the huge armored pine which helped form the frame of the cabin, a pair of squirrels with progeny still nested, whom on earlier acquaintance he had addressed as Mr. and Mrs. Boomer, defied the laws of gravity in descent. Perhaps in appreciation of the hand-cooked breakfasts he had shared with them, perhaps because they expected further provender from the appetizing piles on the palette, they perked their tufted heads this way and that, chattering as though in favorable comment, for all the world like the human pretenders so inevitable in city galleries. Out of all proportion to their size, they subtracted from the solitude.

For a couple of hours Parker painted, pleased that

he should be at work again, inspired to excel. But there was a green that he tried for in vain from the tubes of his assortment—the pale yet potential green of sunlight on laurel, shafted through the deepest shadow. He arose and stepped back to study his latest experiment with dissatisfied eyes.

Suddenly he leaped aside. The report of a gunshot had shattered the quiet. A black spot near the upper left-hand thumbtack told that a bullet had pierced the frame of his stretcher. As he edged toward the more substantial cover of the armored pine, he realized that only his attempt at the elusive green had removed him in time.

Scarcely had he gained such shelter as the tree afforded, feeling painfully large and conspicuous, when a second shot spat from the unseen gun, a third, an instant fourth.

In the anxious silence that ensued, his vital concern over the integrity of his own hide was somewhat alloyed by the observation that, in these last shots at least, his work had been aimed at, rather than himself. The edge of the upper right-hand tack had been dented; the left-hand one had been missed entirely, as testified by a black polka-dot a half-inch below it; the fourth had been hit so squarely that the canvas was cut from the board and curled inward.

With an imprecation, Parker turned and peered about. If his mortal career was to end, it would be now, since he could not achieve invisibility. But in the laurel bushes that entirely screened the cabin and shed, nothing was seen to move, save the general, gentle flutter of the foliage. Not the faintest trace of smoke could he discern and no guidance could be

hoped from the squirrels. They had wisely disappeared.

Substantiated in the theory that the immediate exaction of his life was not the object of the interruption, he spent the next half-hour systematically flaying the brush and searching for tracks. He was urged by a review of the several warnings he had received since his somewhat precipitate arrival in Dismal Gap. Was this last a warning, too, he asked himself?

Flouted in the discovery of any trace which he could assume to have been made by a prowler, he decided on artifice. Returning to the easel, he gathered up the canvas, folded easel and camp-chair, returned to the cabin, entered by the front door. The rear one stood open. With scarcely a pause to deposit his paraphernalia upon the cot, he seized his rifle and hurried out the back in time to see a disturbance of the underbrush, as of some one approaching to settle in ambush.

Without waiting to count the cost, he rushed the laurel and threw himself flat on the ground. The crash of a precipitate retreat rewarded him, although he could see nothing ahead but green. Pressing closely after the crackling of brush and thud of footfalls upon log or hard-pan, he plunged in reckless pursuit. But not for long.

A sudden cessation of noise ahead brought him to a standstill. His quarry must have side-stepped, perhaps had swung beyond pursuit of his ears into the low-hanging boughs.

Exasperated, he began to beat the bush, this way and that, back and forth, determined to flush the disturber of his morning's work. He would not be

ridiculed that way, he assured himself, with the vehemence of his unwonted bodily energy. Whoever had aimed those impertinent bullets into the four corners of his canvas was going to account to him.

He had need of persistence. Nothing whatever came of the bush-beating, not the faintest sound of any retreat, although several times he stopped short and held his breath for intensive listening.

Perspiring from mental as well as physical temperature, he dropped off a cut-bank to rest and think. There he found himself face to face with a humorous-eyed white mule—a white mule with red legs, tied to the rhododendron copse.

“Say, you didn’t fire those shots?” he asked aloud, returning the look.

The beast continued to stare at him, his elongated features solemn, absolutely non-committal. By not so much as a twitch of lip or ear did he acknowledge the demand.

A rush of light came to Parker. Association of ideas led him to conclusion. White mule with red legs—girl of wondrous hair—Metcalf place nearby.

A queer way to greet an inoffensive tourist whom once she had befriended, unto whom she had ministered by washing his face and ears! Why should she wish to demonstrate her marksmanship by puncturing the tacks of the canvas upon which he was at work—upon which he was painting what bade fair to be a masterpiece?

He had this and a few other questions to ask Miss Vernaluska Metcalf and he intended to ask them, even if she had evaded him in the woods by supercraft, he assured himself. She would answer, he

guessed—that is, unless she preferred to walk home!

“Put them up, stranger!”

This pithy interruption rewarded a tedious campaign of waiting on the part of the man—Mr. Hybrid hadn’t seemed to mind.

The voice was that of the girl who had put Tobe Riker in his place—there could be no doubt of it, although no one substantiated the conclusion in person.

Her command had been specific enough. Even Parker, unused to such, had no doubt what was meant by “them.” He did drop his weapon and raise one hand, but only to lift his velour fedora, wave it toward the bush in general, then lay it on the bank beside him.

“Howdy-do, Miss Metcalf? Been there all along? Come on out.”

When she appeared from the thickest of the rhododendron clumps, he understood better how she had eluded him. Her dress was green; in fact, almost that pale, potential shade for which he had been trying when the first shot had interrupted.

The perception impressed him. Above the gingham, her hair, from which she had removed her hat, flushed in the sunlight with something the effect of the early rhododendron flowers atop the green plants.

“You appear to enjoy Solomon’s company,” she said. “*I’m* hungry.”

Parker’s resentful expression eased at the sight of hers.

“Oh, Solomon and I get along all right. You see, I’m sort of wise myself in my day and degenera-

tion. Now that you mention it, I'm sort of hungry, too."

"Leastwise, not so you can't control it," she snapped. "Why have you been sitting guard on my mule?"

"Curiosity, my dear young woman—curiosity given endurance by an even stronger thing or two." Parker had arisen at her emergence from cover. "It may seem a small matter to you, but self-respect compels me to ask why you shot holes into all four corners of my picture."

"I didn't hurt it none."

"You didn't exactly ruin it, no. But do you think it was very nice to interrupt a harmless artist at work in that—er—emphatic way?"

A suggestion of a dimple wavered into her cheek as she proposed: "Any audience has got a right to express itself, ain't it? I was—was hissing you."

"Hissing? But why?"

"Because I don't like your picture nohow, that's why! Now that your self-respect is attended, I'll be wishing you good morning."

With this vixenish addendum, she started toward the mule. But Parker claimed her consideration with several more demands.

"My self-respect isn't properly attended. Having said that much, you owe it both to yourself and me to say more. You shot up my picture because you didn't like it? Why don't you like it?"

"It is a picture of nature that ain't natural."

"How could you know—that is, how could you see its detail at such a distance?"

She sniffed, probably incensed anew by his cor-

rected insinuation that she was no fit critic of his work.

"Oh, I slipped up plenty close enough to see that picture. I could have seen it a quarter-mile, likely, the way you were wasting good paint. Why didn't you fling it on with a palette-knife?"

The question caught his attention even above his resentment. He took a more persuasive start:

"Perhaps you don't know, Miss Metcalf, that my method with that landscape is one highly approved by an ultra-modern school. They hope to make the present-day age of art distinctive for its specialization. One thing in every picture, they think, is enough to emphasize. As a quick means to a super-brilliant end, it is——"

"Perhaps," she mimicked, putting full weight on his didactic tone, "I understand what you mean without your putting yourself out further."

"I'm sure you'd have liked my effort better," he continued, "had you known the name to which I was painting it—'Early to Rise.'"

"'Early to Rise,' was it? Say, you-all had best get up earlier next time!"

She had the additional unkindness to vent a small, lilting laugh.

"Well, of all the unmitigated——" The indignation of the artist from the world outside started to boil over; then, because in his work he was always ready to learn, he turned off the fire. "I wish you would tell me," he said, "why my picture offended you into shooting bullets at it. I thought it rather good."

She showed herself reached by his good-natured appeal.

"I don't mind if you don't," she smiled. "As a student of these mountains, I felt it my plumb duty to stop you. You could shovel on the paint to copy Simms's calico counter, or anything made by man, or even folks—who generally look a heap like what they-all make of themselves—and I wouldn't have a nary word to say. But when you set about making a freak out of Nature——"

She paused a moment, studying him speculatively, as if to determine whether there could be any good in him, then went on:

"Do you know, it always appears to me like God-a-mighty must have taken particular pains tinting the Blue Ridge, knowing He'd use it for a place to rest His spirit in. Can't you see how everything is blended proper, with a nary splotch around? Sometimes I lie down on the moss and shut my eyes. Then I forget sight, feel only sound. The whole range kind of sings songs to me, sometimes sad and sometimes chirky, according to the weather, but never loud. Every rock and every flower and every leaf is singing, singing along; but no voice ever raises loud or discordant above the rest. It's just grand and smooth—like religion! Of course you can't ever touch it in paint, but why don't you try, painter man—why don't you *try*?"

The girl had lost all diffidence in the course of her speech; her eyes held steadily on his; her face was aglow. In her dress of indeterminate green, backed by the deeper-hued bushes, her hair an aureole of spun copper, she made an impression upon the color convert to which he perforce bent the knee. She was a strange creature and really beautiful, he told himself. She had not a bad feature. Probably her

skin, beneath the freckles and tan, was the thin porcelain that went with her hair.

The truth in her criticism of what now looked plainly a faddish, tawdry effort humbled him, awoke a sort of gratitude in him for her interruption, to replace the pique he had shown. He had seen red so long—nothing but red, red, red—perhaps he had grown dense to subtler effects.

But before he could express himself, her mood changed. A hostile look conquered that of exultation as she remembered.

"If you-all don't mind, I've got an engagement now—a pressing engagement to meet a square meal."

"Won't you take lunch with me?" Parker exclaimed eagerly. "My larder is well stocked with things warranted by the labels to cook in a jiffy."

"Thank you," she refused curtly, "but I've brought my own chunk."

Forthwith she began untying a small parcel from the saddle of Solomon. This she opened; from it produced a tin cup, a pair of sandwiches, a thick slice of cake with nut-studded frosting, and two red-cheeked, comely apples.

She started toward the creek with the cup, but Parker intercepted her.

"You will allow me," he insisted over her protest.

When he returned with it dripping, he found her seated, energetically undertaking one of the sandwiches. As she accepted the cup, with an embarrassed nod for his courtesy, she said:

"I 'spect you-all think it would be turn-about for me to ask you to share my grub."

"There looks to be plenty," he encouraged.

"There is a-plenty, but——"

"I should be delighted." Parker accepted with his best manner and started to seat himself on the bank. He straightened, however, on her exclamation:

"Don't you sit down beside me—I ain't asked you yet!"

"But you're going to, aren't you?"

"That's the point; I'm not." She returned viciously to the sandwich.

"I couldn't let even a dog stand around as hungry as I am, and not offer him a crust. I don't eat so much as most men—could do with very little."

"Folks had ought to be friendly before they break bread together."

"And aren't we that—friendly?"

Parker tried for a very hungry expression as he glanced from the food to her, from her back to the food. He realized as he had not done before that he was starved for companionship.

"Surely not." The auburn lashes lifted from a nice selection of the best biting-place in an apple cheek. They revealed a sneer in the fawn-colored eyes. "I'm right glad that my manners didn't get the best of me and make me ask you to lunch. There ain't any particular reason why I should eat with a *slick*."

Her culminative vehemence made Parker gasp; then chuckles began to agitate him.

"I've enjoyed that joke before," he murmured between laughs, "but it never grows tiresome. You'll have to pardon me, but—but——"

The girl made no remark. She sat and watched him, eating energetically the while, as though in devouring the last crumb of the luncheon which he had elected to divide she could most tellingly express her

disapproval of him and his unseemly levity over a subject so serious to her.

She had swallowed the last bite, had mounted, and was heading out of the copse, when he first seemed to realize that she was going.

"Oh, I say, Miss Metcalf, wait a minute!" he cried, springing up and following her. "If you'll let me explain how ridiculous it is——"

"I reckon my funny-bone ain't so sharp as yours, stranger."

He caught the bridle and tried to stop the mule, but was forced to deliver his further remarks on the move. Solomon proceeded to demonstrate that he was wise enough to recognize but one master.

Parker, his arm around the mule's neck, stumbled backward, facing the girl with the one-sided, winning smile that had gained the day for him with so many women of his past.

"I wish you wouldn't call me stranger. I've met you twice before, and your father once, to say nothing of knowing many of your acquaintances—Asa Simms, the Plotts, and others in the village."

"'Pears to me you have met too many already."

"But why not, when I have come to your mountains entirely on my own initiative, just to have a nice, peaceable time? Naturally I expected folks to treat me in a nice, peaceable way. I am used even to being *liked*, Miss Metcalf, and I had hoped that you——"

"Ain't that why they sent you, maybe?" she suggested.

"Nobody sent me, except—— Do stop this stiff-necked, forty-horse-power whippet, and let me get breath enough to explain!"

"I 'spect you haven't noticed," she said cuttingly, "that I am in something of a hurry? Git *ep*, Solomon!"

At the aversion in her voice and face, Parker released his hold of her mount and stopped. From the middle of the stream, where he found himself, soaked to the knees, he stood looking after her.

"I'm coming over to make a call on you at Roaring Fork," he threatened in lifted voice.

"Don't you dare! Haven't you-all got any manners, to call on a lady when you ain't asked?"

"But I'm coming to call on your father. I feel sure he'll be fair enough to listen to me. I shall hope, however, to have the pleasure——"

"Don't you hope for any such unlikely thing!" At last she had turned, a vehement note in her tones. "You won't find your kind of pleasure on Roaring Fork, Mr. Parker of New York, and you *will* find what's worse. Don't you come—I warn you!"

She heel-urged Solomon into a sudden sprint of speed. Lickety-split, they were gone.

Parker stood for several seconds longer in the stream, contemplating the agitation of the branches through which she had disappeared. His ears felt hot, his breath was coming hard. He realized that he was very angry. What an overbearing, regardless disposition she had, the green-clad quarry whom he had thought fairly trapped! Never had he met such insolence from a woman, even when he was at fault, as he certainly was not in this instance.

Very well, he would not call on her, since she had forbidden it. He would leave her to wonder and wait in vain. But, even though not the revenuer she had insisted him, he *would* find a way to the Metcalf still.

CHAPTER XIII

DROPS OF FIRE

By the time Cal Parker's next morning stint with the brush had been executed, a new resolve was added to those lately made. Not only must he prove himself to himself; also he must convince the blockaders that he was a wet customer, rather than the dry avenger they thought him. In so doing, he would make the popskull popper's daughter forget her ornery attitude toward himself and his work.

There wasn't a doubt that he could get and give "references." There were certain bar clerks, wine agents, and hotel managers of the "biggest" town who doubtless would vouch for him as a customer. Why, he might even add a psychopathist or two for good measure, and the recommendation of a six week's sojourn at Professor William Huntoon's "health farm." Since it was for money that blockade was distilled and the double-outlaw risk run, with money he ought to be able to buy up any resentment over his victory.

As a plan of immediate action, he would follow the road in the westerly direction of Abide-with-me Shortoff's tip. He would begin a thorough search of the entire region about the Metcalf lair.

In good spirit with his problem and himself, Calvin Parker set forth. No fear that his mount would lead back to the Shortoff place tightened his hold on the

rein. He had become convinced on that first ride home that Teetotaler's bias gate would never fulfill any definite intention of the horse-mind. Indeed, so certain was he of this that he spoke in out-loud companionship:

"There are things about you, old hoss, that might interfere with a rider of a less philosophic trend than I. But me it gratifies to ponder that, no matter how progressive may be your ideas, you'd only run in circles if given your head. You're hopelessly lopsided, Tee. To get anywhere you need the guidance of two-eyed intelligence. That's me, you must understand—Cal Parker, at last seeing things with both lamps wide!"

The roads were few, but the trails devious. For two hours and more the mud-heavy hoofs carried mount and man through a dripping wilderness. The break in the monotony was a relief when Teetotaler stopped short, threw up his head, evidenced that he at least had full use of both ears.

The sound which had startled the horse loudened in approach—a husky human voice chanting a weird melody. Parker drew rein and waited where the mud-trail made a sharp turn around a clump of alders. Greatly to his surprise, as well as to his interest, the singer proved to be his first adviser in Dismal Gap, Cotton Eye Lee.

At recognition, the black seemed moved chiefly by fright.

"Get you behind me, cap'n!" he exclaimed, both hands upraised, as if in defense.

On finding his path effectively blocked by a side-wise presentation of the pinto, he turned and began scuttling along the backward trail.

"Hold up, Cotton! There's somewhat I wish to say to you! You were friendly enough on starting back to Dismal the other day. Did you decide afterward that the recompense wasn't sufficient?"

"Laws, no! But I'm a changed nigger since."

"You don't look it."

The white-flecked eyeball rolled, as also the soot-dark one. "Changed in my heart, cap'n. I was dry as a hunk of charcoal then; now it's as much as my life's worth to mention sap to you, not speaking of my job."

Parker was doubly interested. Out of consideration for the nerves of his quondam black guide, he rode nearer and lowered his voice.

"What is this job, and who started the irrigation of your arid veins?"

"Irrigation?" murmured Cotton Eye, fascinated, despite his fear. "Old Tom Metcalf finds he can't get along without my irrigation, so he sends Rex Currie to pry me off'n Colonel Dry Dryden. When that sure-enough devil sets himself to pry anybody off'n anything—— But, say, cap'n, I got to be shanking it along!"

The New Yorker was of another mind. With some ostentation and just in time to catch the tail of the negro's glance, he produced a bill-fold from his pocket, selected from its thick contents a crisp five-dollar note.

"Your inherent discernment should have told you that there is no harm in me," he began grandiosely. "This token in my hand as well as others in my pocket ought to convince you that there's a whole lot of good. If they have told you to beware of me as a revenuer, Cotton Eye, they have basely imposed

upon the credulity which in you is so—so—I might say, so circumambient.”

“You-all might—that’s plumb right, cap’n. My own mother couldn’t never deny but what I’m mighty circumambient,” interjected the black, both fingers and ears twitching from cupidity.

“What I’d like to exchange this token for is what I wanted that first day down in Dismal Gap and failed to get from Postmaster Simms—a quart of bottled kick for my stomach’s sake.”

The mental struggle of the negro was obvious. He blinked vigorously in his regard of the bank-note. He took a step forward. His hands clutched the air. Then an imagined sound in the woods broke temptation’s spell. Whirling about in the mud, he began a precipitate retreat, sputtering protestations as he went.

To Parker his words came back disjointedly.

“Get behind me, cap’n. See you-all negotiate yourself on yon side of the creek. I ain’t taking anything away from you, and I ain’t bringing anything back.”

With shuffling gait he was gone—gulped by the brush.

Astride Teetotaler, pursuit looked unfeasible to Parker. He seriously doubted, furthermore, whether the entire collection of bills in his wallet would overcome the black’s primal craving. He must use his persuasions upon some one higher in the protectorate of the illicit traffic before he could hope to obtain the wherewithal for the test of his reform.

Judging it to be a full hour before dark, he decided to continue “projecting.” The more of neigh-

boring area he covered, the less there would remain for to-morrow.

Perhaps half an hour later, the piebald's unshod feet, padding soundlessly in the heavy trail, brought out upon a creek which Parker assumed to be Roaring Fork. As he was debating whether to cross from this, the "yon" side, to the other, he saw the back of a man who was trudging away from him up a feeder of the main stream. Even in the dusk, and at the distance, the native showed to be exceptionally tall and broad of shoulder. His leisurely stride and omission of backward glances augured that he did not suspect any surveillance. A sack or pouch of some sort was slung over his one shoulder.

This pack it was that held suggestiveness for Parker—the possibility that it might hold corn or rye on its way to some blockade process. He decided to follow afoot. Joining the two ends of Teetotaler's reins in a hard knot, he threw them over a sapling; then, with what stealth he could command, started after the disappearing man.

The "branch" had a sharp fall, as he discovered, once he began following it through the shrubbery. It seemed to be fleeing in noisy trepidation from the frown of the largest mountain, which Parker decided must be the Vernaluska of regional fame for which the daughter of the Metcalfs had been named.

In the looming shadows and tangle of undergrowth he presently lost sight of the pursued; but only for a moment. On straining his eyes upward, he was rewarded by a glimpse of the tall figure disappearing into a rough-board shack which stood on a ledge of rock several yards to the right.

Excitement caught Parker as he crouched behind a storm-flung boulder, needlessly, perhaps, in the thickening gloom. Had he at last come upon a still? Another moment, light from within outlined the door and window of the structure.

With a stealth of tread which he felt any Indian might have envied, he circuitously approached the smaller of these apertures, which showed to be innocent of glass or sash. The going was precarious and the window on the down-hill slant. He crouched low when close enough to see inside.

The scene was not what he had hoped or expected. None of the equipment for the manufacture of "bumblings" showed in the light of the rosin torch, made dim and uncertain by frequent sputtering. Of such furnishings as were, there stood out in best detail a stone fireplace directly beneath the flare. In the ashes of the hearth knelt the man with the sack. His great shoulders were bent forward to aid the groping of his hands along the sooty stones of the chimney back. His hat had been discarded, revealing a leonine mass of tawny hair. A rifle lay upon the floor beside one bent knee.

Old Tom Metcalf himself it was.

The Northerner recognized him with an admixture of triumph and shock. He felt his way farther forward among the loose rocks which littered the slant of the ledge. He was in time to witness the removal of a stone from the chimney and its placement upon the hearth. When the groping hands again emerged they held one of the tin lard-pails so innumerable in a region where fats are the prevailing condiment of most things culinary.

The patriarch turned on the hearth, placed the pail in the fullest light of the flare, into it dipped both huge hands. They reappeared with something falling through their fingers that looked like drops of liquid fire.

Over and over again the bluish tongues lapped the soot-blackened palms, ran down the fingers, with a tinkling sound dripped back into the pail. Yet they showed not to burn, for the old man's expression was entranced as he bent low over them. His lips began to move and mumble in a sort of doggerel, several connected utterances of which reached the ears outside.

"Blue flames, you-all are mine—you've got to be mine. Leave them sneer, leave them tap their skulls. We'll singe their sneers one day. You've got the power I crave. You can open the gates of the world to my gal. Won't you do it for Verney, if not for me? She's young and she's got power like you. Why hide you-all from Tom, when he's going to git you whether or no? Why scorch his peace of mind when he——"

Whimpering choked his words. He sank his face into double handfuls of the iridescent, tinkling, trickling fire; continued to mutter and sob. His shoulders shook, as if from man-sized emotion. His voice reduced into a wheedling, unintelligible, senile whine.

Parker, pressing closer, in the hope of distinguishing more of these garbled mutterings, unfortunately put his weight upon a rounded stone and lurched forward, straight into the window frame. In his effort to stay the fall, both hands shot out, so that, when his forward movement ceased, both arm-pits

were as firmly, cruelly wedged as though forced into a straight-jacket.

On raising his head he found his predicament pointed by the round mouth of a rifle barrel. Despite the undoubted surprise of his appearance on the scene, the hands which held the weapon were steady. In the shifty torch-light Old Tom's face showed to be twisting with fury.

"Hell's banjer—the slick!" he cried. "Stop wrenching—you can't heft loose. What be you-uns hunting this P.M.? Do you call me bird, beast or fish? You hear me asking of you. Best be thinking quick or I——" The tightening of rifle-aim completed his suggestion.

Parker ceased his struggles to be free from the vise into which his awkwardness had flung him, advised by the point of the gun.

"Let me explain my position, Mr. Metcalf."

"'Pears to me that don't need no explaining."

"But it does, sir; rather, the incentive that got me into this somewhat tight place. You folks around here have a mistaken idea of me. I am seeking liquor, yes; but for my own use. I am able and willing to pay well for——"

"You'll pay, by cripes!"

The blond patriarch's interruption was an angry roar.

"I'd ought to make you pay this minute, by right, for spying on—on——" He glanced back at the hearth, innocent of lard pail, of mysterious flames, of the cobblestone taken from the chimney-back. Marvelously swift had been his restoration at first hint of alarm. His expression was less fierce as he returned to the window's prisoner. "But there's

smarter than what I am on your trail. You'll get yourself run outen these parts, I reckon, without my man-killing you."

"I reckon I won't, if you have any justice in your system. This mountainside isn't your property, anyhow, is it?" Parker protested, the while guardedly working one shoulder upward.

The effect of the question upon the old man was unnerving. The rifle again raised and a steady eye squinted along its barrel.

"What's it you say?" he bellowed. "I ain't never been no man-killer, but I'll start with you, if you pester me with another question. 'Tain't a matter of whose land this is—you got no right prowling over it. If you wriggle your right side down instead of up you can heft loose. The winder's warped atop—has been plumb squaw-wifted ever since the Bald's last conniption fit."

Parker found these instructions practical. Loosened from the grip of the slanted frame, he turned to urge his contested explanations upon the mountaineer.

But in the same split-minute two disconcerting things occurred. The flare went out and a bullet tore through the soft crown of his fedora—he felt the press of it lift his hair.

"That means you git and stay git!" amplified a ravening voice from the pitch-black inside.

Under all circumstances this appealed to Calvin Parker as sensible advice. He got.

CHAPTER XIV

HIS CUT-BACK

THE man from "out North" was unprepared for the advent of the annual blackberry-blossom storm. Some time during the night the winds had marshaled their heaviest storm-clouds in the sky; by daybreak were driving a slantwise deluge that made the trees writhe, and beat down completely fern and bush. Already the creek could be heard lashing about in attempts to escape punishment. From the makeshift shelter behind, Teetotaler sounded an occasional snorted protest.

Smoking a pipe just inside the open front doorway, the shut-in watched the spectacle with equivocal interest and dismay. In time, however, the fantastic shapes of the cloud battalion, the kaleidoscopic tints in the shrapnel of rain, the poor spirit—or was it wisdom—of the growing things that offered no resistance grew monotonous. He closed both doors and lit the candles.

When the fire cheered up, he set himself, with what skill he could summon, to the manufacture of an omelette which, in view of the energy expended in fluffing and flapping it, ought to have tempted his appetite. But it was sad as the day. It oozed futile tears. He grew disgusted with it as he partook of it.

At last he plumped both elbows upon the table and

permitted himself to brood. The fact that his eyes were gazing straight at Sylvia's latest, framed in a purple leather stand, gave license for this lapse from cheer.

Cause enough for a man to brood—looking at Sylvia's picture—the man who was away! Why had he not appreciated her rarity in time to save himself this torture-cure? The only possible excuse he could think of was that from childhood he had grown used to Sylvia. When had he not been leashed by a preference for her, from the little-boyhood days when her fairy-princess fluff of silver hair had always been waving like the banner of a knight just ahead of him; through the college vacations, when he had found her a *débutante*, with sentiment beginning to make mystery in her violet eyes; after his return from the dissipations and art struggles under the tutelage of French masters, when her fragile loveliness and reserve of manner had roused him to a protectorate not felt in any of his crasser, Latin Quarter affairs?

On that culminative "varnishing day" at the Academy, when he was paid tribute as "perhaps the most promising of our younger American artists," it had seemed fitting that his triumph should be a portrait of Sylvia as the one whitest lily-of-the-valley, gleaming from a vague, fanciful background of many of the same—not one so elusive, so exotically sweet as she.

His technique had been mentioned as "inspired"—but inspired, as he had acknowledged both to himself and to Sylvia, by his lifetime of looking at her. Their engagement had been the most natural development in the world, approved by the two fami-

lies and society. That it had developed into a long one had been tacitly understood by every one to be a punishment for his growing self-indulgence with the cup.

Once, in the reaction after a conspicuous social *contretemps*, he had pointed that marriage might "brace him up." For the first time she had mentioned her jealousy of his habit. Wine was her rival, she acknowledged prettily. Until he had worn out the other love, she dared not trust herself to him. She was content to wait. Time enough to settle down, she had declared, after both had had their fling. So the days and months, even years, had piled upon each other until——

Parker's elbows straightened along the deal table; his chin continued heavy in his hands; his cheek flattened against the boards in the prostration of his memories.

The shack was stuffy from the fire, thick with tobacco smoke, unpleasantly odorous from spent candles and cookery. One after another the lights went out. The wet logs on the hearth succeeded at last in spitting out the fire. With darkness Calvin Parker fell into an unhappy dose.

Some one laid violent hands upon his shoulders, shook him to an unsteady stand. He muttered resentfully and stared about. He was in his own studio, where he had been the last he remembered. The old-gold walls with their frames of brown-and-bronze, the pet Persian rugs, the costly this and that fancied in his travels—all were recognizable.

Then, too, it was Spencer Pope, his closest friend, who had acted as alarm-clock. He mumbled a rec-

ognition of this fact as he shambled to one of the windows that overlooked the park and threw it up for air. When he faced again toward the huge, beautiful room, he pressed both hands against his temples, which were throbbing.

"What a head!" he murmured, not complainingly, but as one states the infliction of an undeserved ill. "Last night must have been some night—*some* night!"

Disapproval, dark upon Pope's face, gave color to his tone.

"Why, on the eve of the most important day in your career, couldn't you have let the trouble-stuff alone? You're in fine fettle, aren't you, to show your winter's work to the world this afternoon? Of course your personal appearance and habits won't influence the experts and critics, but it will the fashionables, from whom your future commissions must come. You look like a poster of 'A Night Out.' For Sylvia's sake, you might have held in until your exhibition tea was over."

Parker tried a jaunty air, only to realize its failure.

"Had every intention of doing so," he defended. "Forgot my lunch in the varnishing of those two last portraits until too late to get it served here. Taxied down to the Van Vliet for a bite. Only had two or three to rest up on and a lone little bottle with my smelts and tartar. I'd have been all right if a bunch of those velvet-coats and cropped-hair 'partners' hadn't dropped in. They're always so overpoweringly cordial with a chap who has cash enough in pocket to pay the checks. I was billed to take Sylvia to the opera and had to dress, so I

guess I must have been pretty late getting back up-town."

"You were." Pope nodded with grim effect. "At nine o'clock last night she telephoned for me."

"For you—why for you, Spence?"

"A queen wants some courtier dangling around the throne steps. Sylvia asked me to fill in—to take your place, as it were."

A smile was on the deputy collector's good-looking face, a rather strange smile, partly of self-depreciation and partly of—could it be triumph? Parker noticed it and paused a moment to ponder, then promptly gave it up. Let good old Spence smile, if he could; how did it matter just what he was smiling at?

"Went alone to the Winter Palace and afterward to supper at Fred's. Don't remember much after that. Since the morning-after face of that clock says it's noon, I must have got home somewhere in the late earlies."

Pope continued to smile that strange smile of his.

"And by the early lates—to be exact, by three o'clock this afternoon," he said, "you have to be in form to receive the super-ultras of the art set and their self-tagged devotees!"

At this Parker managed mirth-sounds of some buoyancy.

"Don't look so sour about it, friend mentor. The four portraits are varnished, I tell you—finished to the last hair of the last eyebrow."

"But, Cal, if you could see yourself! You look like——"

Parker waved a soothing hand. "My boy, do

you think Mrs. Millionbucks Pembroke is going to hold my looks against me when she sees herself in oils of my spreading, admired by all her crowd? Or Captain Mayflower Hannah, or old Mortgage-on-the-World Flint, or my own lily-of-the-valley lady?"

"Don't class Sylvia with your other sitters," Pope objected. "Sometimes, Cal, you seem positively odious in your cast-iron assurance that nothing you do can affect her good opinion."

"Of course I'm no fit object for a fiancée's eyes just now, Spence, but by that third early-late I'll be—well, an expurgated edition. Just ten minutes under the shower, a once-over shave, a jolt of rye, my breakfast, and a pipe—— While I set about working the miracle, won't you give down-stairs a ring for a grape-fruit, *sans* sugar; a pot of black coffee; three two-minute eggs and a flock of unbuttered toast? That's a good fellow."

Parker started for the annex to the studio proper that held his living quarters. At the door he paused and interrupted his friend's grudging manipulation of the telephone.

"Strange," he remarked, "that I should be wearing this smock! I've often got up fully dressed, but never before in a smock. Wonder why in Sam Hill——"

"That's all—and hurry it, please."

He heard the finish of Pope's order before turning on the water. On turning it off he heard the finish of what evidently had been a second call upon the wire.

"The sooner the better for both him and you. But I want you to see him at his worst—you ought

to know why. Yes, I'll wait. Until seeing you, then."

He did not understand until later. Even then he did not quite see why Spencer, his friend, had taken the initiative and should wish his fiancée to see him "at his worst."

When he presently emerged into the studio he felt somewhat better, and the critical deputy expressed himself as amazed by the transformation. Then, too, Sylvia looked exceptionally beautiful as she swept in, earlier than he could have hoped, but dressed for the exhibition tea. Small, fragile of figure, yet aglow with health, dainty as dawn in her blush-rose crepe, she divided her greetings, her inquiries, her wavery smiles between the two men.

Humility overtook Parker that he should be allowed to look at anything so fresh and fragrant after the chaotic depths of last night. Sylvia always seemed the more desirable after a debauch with his "other love." He longed to kiss the lips that were so tolerant of his fault, but, with Pope present, touched only her finger-tips. That, he felt, was much more than he deserved.

Sylvia was seldom demonstrative, having been reared to the idea that it was enough for her to *be*; but an exclamation of relief escaped her at his appearance.

"You don't look half as bad as Spence—that is, as I expected—not *half*!"

Her reproachful glance at their "mutual friend" renewed Parker's uneasiness over the telephonic fragment he had overheard.

"He's braced up wonderfully in the last hour, as you would appreciate had you arrived when I did,"

Pope declared. "If you and I are up to police duty, I guess the tea can be pulled off. I've just called up the florist, the caterer, and the musicians—it seems that Cal neglected none of the preliminaries. Everything and body is on the way."

"I'm *so* relieved! You gave me something of a shock, Spence, and I do dislike to hurry." She settled in a wing-chair at one side the fireplace, her face lighting exquisitely beneath the large black velvet hat she wore. She lifted her purplish eyes to Parker's.

"Cal," she said quietly, "you know I never have wished to interfere with what should be your own affair, but Spencer thinks you are getting more or less hopeless on the liquor question. You kept me waiting last night without a word of explanation, and all the telephone booths in New York at your service. If it hadn't been for Spence, I'd have——"

"I'm sorry, dear—I'll find some way to make it up to you," Parker interrupted. "But even Spencer Pope hasn't any right to call a man hopeless who does his work before he plays. When you see the way I glorified the Pembroke battle-ax yesterday, you'll understand that I was working at high tension—that in a way I had earned a reaction. And an effect of transparency which I got into the lily leaves came from last-minute inspiration. You can't work like that and plod like a dray-horse afterward. Don't scold me for falling until you have seen the height from which I fell. Suppose we have a preview of the portraits before the rest arrive?"

She glanced from lover to friend, her unwonted effort at severity already weakened.

Pope, seeing this, arose impatiently and strode

to the window. From a stand there he turned, frowning, to inspect the "defence."

Assuming a briskness which physically, at least, he did not feel, Parker sauntered over to the cord which controlled the purple silk sheet before "The Lady of Lilies," already famed as his masterpiece. He drew upon it tenderly, yet with confidence, for, best of anything he had done, he loved this conception of the woman he loved. He did not look at the canvas in its wide, flat frame of green gold-leaf. His eyes glanced hopefully at Pope's stern face, then settled upon Sylvia's to await the reward of her appreciation of what he hoped was a master-touch.

As the curtain clumped on one side the frame he heard his friends' commingled stutter of amaze, saw the girl's jewel-glittering hand clutch the arm of the wing-chair, lift her to her feet, give her a forward impulse. He had expected her to be surprised and pleased, but this emotion—her gasp of astonishment, the sudden flush that stained her pure coloring, her trembling, as if she were about to swoon——

She stopped half-way across the floor space, a look of horror stiffening her face. One hand wavered upward and covered her features, the other pointed forward. Half the sob of a child, half the wail of a woman, her accusation lifted.

"What—*what* have you done?"

"What have I done?"

"You've done it, all right!" Was it triumph that sounded in Pope's voice as he hurried to the girl and half-carried her back to her chair?

Her face sank into both hands. She began to sob.

Fear, unidentified but cruel, clutched at Parker's heart. He strode into the center of the room and turned to face his masterpiece. One glance sent him reeling backward, as he never had reeled when in his cups.

Whence had come this blight upon his gentle fantasy?

Each leaf and lily of the background, which had been but shadows of suggestion, stood forth in offensive detail, wilted and partially decayed. Each feature of the central flower-face had been mutilated until all sweetness of expression was gone—forehead and nose lengthened, eyes bleared with a look of craft, lips curled with superciliousness, chin weakened. The silver hair, that had shimmered like pale sunlight, now suggested fibrilated ice. Frost had browned and shrunk the sheaf of green-leaf satin from which her shoulders rose. The virgin busts, into which such a feeling of reverence had been painted, were flattened into an unlovely thinness. Through the illusion gathered modestly over the heart, a jagged, ugly spot could be discerned, in its center a gnawing worm.

The picture remained a portrait, but one ravished by brutal brushes into a powerful caricature.

From the chair into which he had collapsed, Parker studied the details of this travesty on the most exquisite woman he knew. When able, he glanced around at Sylvia and Pope.

The girl lifted her face and returned his look, her lips opening, as if to speak, but uttering no sound. The man looked disgusted, yet alert—looked to be thinking hard.

"As you know, I was out all last night," said Par-

ker in a lagging voice. "Some one must have broken in."

"You have an enemy—perhaps a rival artist?" faltered Sylvia.

Parker did not answer. A new perception stopped him. His eyes had followed the deputy's to where the smock which he had awakened wearing lay huddled on the floor of his dressing-room. Upon a tabourette in a far corner his palette lay. He remembered having cleaned it yesterday afternoon. He sprang across the room to examine it. It was covered with paint, in daubs and small coils. The tubes nearby showed to have been emptied with a twist that was peculiarly his own.

With hands shaking from what might have been either memory or prescience, he exposed the remaining three portraits of the collection selected for private exhibit that afternoon. All had been maltreated by the brutal brush. That of the wealthy Mrs. Pembroke, who had wished posterity to remember her comparative slenderness of fifteen years ago, now showed the triple chins of to-day, had lost all figure-lines in balloonlike inflations. Horns distinguished the brow of Captain Hannah, and lust drew back his lips, both indelicate tributes to his wide-known reversion from the Puritanism of the ancestors he boasted. Flint, Wall Street magnate, had been remade by a few strokes into a specimen of the chosen, whose blood he denied the more indignantly because it really flowed in his veins.

Diabolically was exaggerated every weak point of those who had paid so high a price that the benefit of all doubts of them might be perpetuated in oils!

The artist reached his own verdict, stupefying, but positive. He spoke the culminative catastrophe.

"I must—have done it—myself."

With the quiet of desperation he faced the two he considered his closest and dearest friends. He forced himself to draw up words from the well of bitterness within him.

"I don't remember anything about it, so I must have been very drunk. To you, Sylvia, I don't know what to say, except that it was my other self that has sinned against you in ruining the portrait you sat for so patiently. I am sorry and ashamed to the last fiber of my worthless self. I will pay the price as best I can—will do whatever you say."

She answered his despair with despair of her own.

"But nothing you can ever pay will save my lovely picture—save you and me *to-day!*"

"I didn't know," remarked Pope, "that cartooning was in your line."

"Only when drunk," acknowledged the recreant gloomily. "It was my first offering to art—got me expelled from Yale. The *Jester* printed some sketches of the faculty which I had made when on a spree. Caution has managed my subconsciousness since, until to-day——"

"Yes, to-day," Pope interrupted, taking out his watch.

"What can we do about to-day?" mourned Sylvia.

Parker heard the tones of subdued discussion with which the deputy talked to his fiancée from the consultation into which he had drawn her; heard fragments of their plan to declare him suddenly ill, to "call off" the tea as best they might; heard Sylvia

pleading against something which Spence had urged. He did not wish to know until they were ready to tell him. He did not care much what they decided. He had promised to abide by their decision, whatever it was, no matter which of them had originated it, and he would.

“And this was it!”

The exile in the cabin on Fallaway Rim spoke aloud for company. Lifting the shoulders that remained broad-built despite misuse of himself, he peered through the gloom. He fancied, rather than saw the photographic eyes of Sylvia Brainard bent with pitying encouragement upon him.

“God help me!” he groaned.

And, for the rest of that day, he thirsted no more.

CHAPTER XV

VARMINT FOOL!

THE blackberry storm seems designed by the weather-gods not to destroy the mountainscape. Just in time it always relents. Early on the fourth day Sol took a squint over the prospect, gave his clouds a final wringing, then fluttered them out to dry. The wind shook up the growing things. The ground drained the drippings. All nature cheered that the huge wash-day was over. In an hour the sun was beaming steadily from a sky whose azure seemed only deepened by the wrung-out clouds flapping below.

From the door of the shack Parker looked down into the valley, pleased as a house-wife might have been at finding everything cleaned up. Straight across, the formerly smudged mountains looked scoured and varnished, as also the blues and grays of the distances, the greens and occasional floral flares of the foreground.

Another thing was clear to him as the day: he had been a week without a drink! Yet where was the virtue of riding "the wagon" if strapped into it? To enjoy his new-found strength he must prove it. Anticipation brightened his face as he stood in the doorway; a gleam lit his eyes, as if reflected from the anticipatory world without. He would change his mind about letting that inhospitable

mountain girl interfere. There must be no more beating about the bush; he would appeal directly, as man to man, to Old Tom Metcalf, according to his original intention. Truly, faint heart never won anything for anybody—either friends or drinks!

A pair of hounds announced his approach, even before he emerged into the considerable clearing that surrounded the double file of oaks and the pretentious—for the region—Metcalf house. He had left Teetotaler at the ford, that he might seem the more defenseless in this morning call.

He was pleased that the hounds returned his greeting in kind. Always had he been said to have "a way" with dogs. Now, having rushed at him savagely, with bristles upraised, they subsided into a tail-waving, sniff-approving escort.

From a chair on the porch a man descended the steps and stood staring at him from under hand-shaded eyes. Even at the distance Parker recognized the giant figure and leonine head of redoubtable Tom.

Remembrance of the old man's parting advices on their two previous encounters lent interest to this defiance of them. "See to it that you hunt only fur, fin, and feathers," he had said on the road. "Now you git and stay git!" had been the command closing the incident at the cabin. The echoed threat of them in Parker's mind gave his greeting suavity.

"Good morning, Mr. Metcalf. I know it's etiquette for a newcomer to wait until the old settlers call on him, but I've been feeling a bit lonely, so here I am."

"Here you——" For a moment the patriarch continued to stare, his chin thrown up from a chest haired over with red where the flannel shirt was unbuttoned. Then he finished sincerely: "Here you be, sure enough; and here I be, plumb gol-dinged!"

"In fact," added Parker, "I'd have been over several days ago, except for the weather."

"Git you out, he-brute!"

Tom's command was startling until understood as addressed to the more importunate of the dogs. His roar at once softened into a conversational tone.

"Come along up the stoop, stranger, and set you a chair."

Parker accepted the invitation with his wonted lazy movements, but his thoughts made up in action. So immediate a concession to "the Parker charm" might be more suspicious than auspicious. "Come along up," had said this lawbreaker who believed him a revenue spy; yet the way he fell in behind would seem to amplify: "I want you ahead of me, so I can watch you."

There was, however, a declaration of square-dealing in the way the mountaineer strode across the porch to the open door, removed the revolver from his hip, hung it upon a nail in the frame—a nail made significant by the company of other nails.

"I'm not after fur or feathers this morning—I'd have to fling rocks if I were." Such was Parker's contribution to this sign of truce.

"I seen that," was the reply.

The "out-Norther" took the sway-back chair indicated, facing the door of what evidently was the living-room. The host straddled a straight-backed one against the wall of logs, thereby helping

himself to a comprehensive view of the approaches to his habitation. His feral eyes settled upon the lax-lounging younger man.

"Quite a winding and raining we-all have been suffering."

"Quite is right." Parker returned this overture with a plunge into the object of his call. "I'd be willing never to meet another blackberry to escape another such storm. There I was, shut up for three days and nights in that windowless shack I've rented, without so much as a drop of liquor to light my thoughts. Honestly, Mr. Metcalf, I'd have given half my year's income for one small bottle of the worst whisky ever bumbled."

The blockader's expression was a triumph, if judged by histrionic standards, its amusement deepening into polite reproof.

"I disgust bad liquor myself."

"Good or bad doesn't matter so much when your tongue is drier than a suction-pump with the feed-pipe out of the well." Parker paused to enjoy his simile. "To tell the end of my sad story first, I'm about desperate for some whisky."

"So we-all have hearn—so we've hearn," chuckled Metcalf.

"You have heard? From whom?"

"My nigger, Cotton Eye, is tolerable talkative. He's told us-uns how the Plotts and Dry Dryden allowed you could happen on some bumbings in the mountains. Wa'n't it Cotton Eye, now, who sent you hoping to Asa Simms? And Sal Shortoff, she gets so boiled up working for the cause that she spills."

"Mrs. Shortoff chose to regard me as a pernicious

influence." Secretly somewhat disconcerted by this array of evidence against him, Parker pursued his course of easy frankness. "Possibly it was to divert my search that she sold me Teetotaler."

Tom Metcalf agreed with a grin. "I wouldn't put it past her."

"The good dame, I also suspect, feared I might share my find with her parched worser half. She seems prohibition-bent."

"Sal sure is. She gives in to Bide about as quick as 'lasses runs." His weathered face straightened, his eyes grew serious as they swept the clearing. "No' Carolina, in this day, stranger, ain't the State for a thirsty man. Time was when I had my dram regular, but I've learned to do without."

"You consummate old liar!" That was what Parker thought, wondering just how many stone-throws away was the Metcalf distillery. Aloud he tried a new approach.

"From all I hear, there are many in the Carolinas who don't obey the law to the letter. Along the roads you are likely to happen upon twigs of laurel which point the way to native bar-rooms."

"So?"

The mountaineer met his visitor's gaze with a look that held no personal interest. It was politely vacuous. In the next breath he changed the subject.

"I'm right sorry you hit on to-day for calling on us-uns, stranger, being as I'm the only one seeable. Miss Emmy, my sister-in-law, who's run the house since my own good woman passed along, drove down to Dismal to buy some store stuff. My gal, Verney, is suffering this morning from the all-overs."

"The all-overs?"

"I reckon you-all would call what she's got a case of nerves. Verney don't have them soon, but when she does she ain't fitten to talk to none, especially a furriner. Sandyred's out with the nigger, planting. Sandy's my man-child. Another day I'd admire to meet him to you. It was powerful common of you-all to make us a call. Likely you'll come again?"

The suggested dismissal of the old man's words and manner Parker chose to disregard.

"To be frank, the object of my visit is a double one," he said. "The social half of it I'll improve, thanks to your kind invitation, when I may meet the rest of your household. As for the other half——"

He lifted his attention from patting one of the dogs so quickly as to surprise a frown on the face recently masked in dissimulation.

"Mr. Metcalf," he demanded in a voice that snapped, "will you or will you not sell me some whisky?"

With a bang the uptilted forelegs of the patriarch's chair met the floor.

"By cripes, you have got the nerve of—— Be you a varmint fool to come here after—— I'll show you what I meant when I——"

Each unfinished, these ejaculations spat through his lips.

A sound and sight within the house caught Parker's attention.

From just inside the door, around that side of the frame where sat his host, he saw a long, strong-handed arm extend. A checked lavender gingham skirt fluttered a trifle. The next moment a face appeared—one surrounded by fire-glinting hair.

His eyes met the forbidding, fawn-green ones of Vernaluska Metcalf.

Any impulse to get to his feet, to greet her, was subdued in time by the vehement shake of her head and her significant finger-to-lips. In the seconds he could afford for consideration he saw her possess herself of the revolver which her parent had hung upon the nail as a sign of hospitality. There was no suggestion of "all-overs" in her rapid movements.

A spell of amazement held Parker. What did she want with the weapon? Would he find it trained upon him from the shadows?

Did she mean, with her own "ornery" hand, to make good the warning that he would not find anything "pleasurable" on Roaring Fork?

CHAPTER XVI

PAID BY PROMISE

WITH return of his outer attention to Old Tom, Parker saw that any immediate outburst from that source was averted. The sudden fury was smoothing away, the color receding from his face, the angry lips straightening into lines of guile.

"Likely you-all didn't intend to rile me," said the mountaineer, "but you'd best not ask for bumblings again. Naturally I ain't got nary none, account of the law."

A glance within showed Parker an anxious, admonitory face. Yet he persisted toward his goal.

"Far from wishing to rile you, sir, I'd like to confide in you as I would in a friend. There seems to be a report circulating through the region that I'm a revenue officer sent by the government to make trouble for blockaders."

Old Tom's nod was nothing more than admission that he had heard the report.

"This you will realize," he from the North continued, "to be even more cruel than absurd when you know that I am a man of independent income whose chief fault lies in having partaken too freely of the mead that cheers. I have come to the Blue Ridge to get a grip on my thirst. My presence here this morning, unarmed and unattended, when I've

been warned of your suspicions of me, ought to argue for the truth of what I claim."

"It might—and then again it mightn't." The patriarch showed that he was not to be impressed by talk alone.

"Here is my membership in the Satyrs—a famous New York club to which no revenueur could belong. Will you oblige me by looking it over?"

After the mountaineer had scrutinized the credential protected by isinglass on the inside of the card-case extended and had returned it with only a grunt by way of comment, Parker proceeded more boldly.

"You are generally believed throughout the countryside, Friend Metcalf, to distil a grade of corn whisky which loses nothing of strength or flavor from the fact that it pays no tax to the Federal government. Wait just a minute before you flare up again—hear me through!"

The last exclamation had been drawn out by the glower which the mountaineer had focused upon him.

"Get a lavish with your explanationing, then!"

Parker proceeded to do so, but not before risking a glance into the living-room. The sight within stirred his heart and voice.

The girl still stood just beyond her father's range of vision with the revolver broken, the cartridges extracted and in her hand. This she showed him as, with significant gesture, she dropped the shells into the pocket of her dress, snapped to the gun, and returned it, harmless, to its nail upon the door frame. Again he noticed that in none of her move-

ments was there sign of that state of nerves under which she was supposed to be suffering.

With a thrill he realized that Vernaluska was not allied against him, rather was acting for him, was safeguarding him against possible untoward impulses of her irascible parent. What a girl she was, he saluted her in thought—what a resourceful, pally sort of girl!

Metcalf was widely said to be a man of discrimination and fair play, he was meanwhile suavely urging. That was why he had risked the morning visit to his home in the teeth of their past unpleasantness. Was he likely to have come were he really a revenueur? Would he not have tried slinking methods out of regard for his personal safety?

"There's no safe concluding about revenue slicks, whether or no," the old man drawled, now quite dispassionately. "Some of the cuckolds are right pert of tongue, while others are just fool-cussed."

"Well, sir, I'm neither pert nor fool-cussed, as you'll realize when you know me better," Parker insisted. "The government doesn't know me except for a bit of income tax, and I'll never be a collector. I come to you as a private customer, ready to pay your price. The delivery can take any form you select for your safety until after I've established your confidence. What do you say, sir?"

The mountaineer arose suddenly from the seat which he had been straddling. Parker straightened in his, nerved himself for a possible attack. He glanced toward the nail in the door-frame. Upon it the revolver hung, looking no more innocuous than before it had been robbed. The girl had disappeared.

Enjoyment of the situation surged up in Parker. He hoped that the wily old law-breaker would make a lunge for the gun, level it upon him, pull the hammer down upon an empty cylinder.

But the attack for which Metcalf had arisen proved not to be one of physical force. After rounding his chair to the porch edge, he flicked a caterpillar off a cluster of geranium-blooms, then turned the chair around, sat down upon it and very deliberately crossed his legs.

"You-all have got a plumb convincing way of putting things," he remarked. "If what you do was as convincing as what you say——"

A loudening, singing tenor voice interrupted. From around the house the words of the song became distinguishable:

"Feed the furnace and stir the mash;
Play the ace; you get the hash."

An expectant look soothed the severity of Metcalf's face. "It's Sandyred. Makes them up himself, them songs."

Into view strode the son of the "cantankerous" clan—a replica of what Old Tom must have been as a youth.

"Sandy, this here's Parker from out North," said the old man by way of introduction. "Glad you happened along, for he's in a powerful hurry to be moving toward home, and you can show him the short cut to the ford."

"I can that," agreed the youth, with uncomplimentary alacrity.

"What do you think, son?" asked Tom, with a

chuckle. "He came up here hoping to buy popskull—heard that we Metcalfs made it ag'in' the law."

"Hell's fire, dad!" The younger actor took an aggressive forward step. "And you're a-standing for a charge like that? Let the cuss so much as hint such——"

"Easy, son. He ain't charging nothing; just hankering to feed a thirst, so he says." The parent's voice hardened. "But I'm just telling you, Mr. Parker, we-all know enough about them polite customs you was mentioning not to look forward to another call from you until after we've returned this one of yourn."

After expressing the hope that his social overture might soon be met in kind, Parker started down the road with Sandyred. He did not feel altogether cheated of the result of his visit. No matter how rude the mountain girl had been to him, there would be an argument in her favor every time he remembered the appearance of that brown hand and the removal of the bullets.

They stopped short in the road. A woman's cry of distress from somewhere in the woods to their right had cut the placid air.

"You'll have to project your own way, stranger. I've got to go!"

With the next breath the youth sprang into the underbrush.

The noise of his departure crackled back to Parker, who hesitated, tempted to follow. But second thought started him again toward the ford. He had "projected" enough for one day. Whatever the cause of alarm, it could be no affair of his. He was contemplating the next move of the liquor quest,

some dozen rods down the road, when the thicket parted and Vernaluska Metcalf stumbled down the bank. Her face was flushed, eyes dilated, hair gloriously streaming. Her left hand was pressed against her heart, her right was held behind.

"Miss Metcalf!" cried Parker. "I hope nothing has happened. We heard a scream, and your brother departed like a shot."

"It was mine, that scream—a signal. I've got to make a hustle back," she panted, "and explain that I had an extra bad attack of the all-overs."

"But why the ruse?"

"I wanted to give you-all something unbeknownst to the folks. See what I managed to lug here on the run, dodging Sandyred!"

At sight of that which she produced from behind her back he took several hurried steps toward her.

"A jug!" he exclaimed. "For me?"

She nodded. "A gallon jug and full of corn juice. I'd go slow on it if I was a paleface like you-uns. It's a sight more powerful than what you've been used to out North."

The surprise of it, the joy of it, the almost divine relief of it, made Parker well-nigh inarticulate.

"Why, you blessed girl!" he finally managed. "To think that you— How can I ever thank you? Let me relieve you of——"

She stepped back, frowning, the jug again behind her.

"You can't relieve me until you pay—leastwise you can't unless you're the scum that'd try taking it from me by force. I'd give you a right smart tussle for it, at that."

Parker's advance stopped, his surge of warmth

toward her checked by her evident mercenary tendency. His hand sought his ever-ready wallet.

"I'll pay anything the stuff's worth to you," he said.

"Oh, it ain't money that can buy this, so put back your container. It's a promise I want you to pay."

"A promise, Miss Metcalf?"

"Yes, out-Norther, the sort of word-of-honor promise that gents keep or don't make. It is that you take yourself out of this region without delay."

"Take myself out? Would you mind telling me why?"

Vernaluska's eyes flashed. "You must have sight worse than Teetotaler not to see that you're in danger every minute you stay."

"From your father?"

She shook her head. "My father fights fair, but there are them that don't. Rex Currie has reasons of his own for hating you, and he's an enemy to worry any man. I know Rex. He won't give you a chance to fight back. Promise you'll take yourself off, and the jug's yours."

"Guess I'll have to do without my bumblings today," said he wearily. "I can't seem to get worried over Rex Currie's dislike, and I may make my own chance to fight back when his attack comes."

"Then"—she hesitated, studying the stubbornness of him—"I'll swap that promise for another. I'll give over the jug if you'll agree never to come to our place again."

"Never come again?" He paused to look into the insistent eyes of her.

More than anything else in the world he wanted that jug. He had not realized the dynamic power

of the desire for what it held that had grown in its absence until it was so nearly within his grasp.

There came momentary diversion. Up the road sidled Teetotaler, a broken rein explaining his escape from the bush to which he had been tied. By the time Parker had retrieved his straying mount his decision was made.

"I'll give you my word of honor not to come to see you," he said, "subject to your release of the jug, if you will promise to come to see me at the Fallaway cabin."

The look she returned to his was searching, almost mandatory in its effort to learn his trustworthiness. Then, all unexpectedly, an impish smile dimpled her face, her lilting laugh sounded.

"Don't you worry none; I'll be seeing you—more than you like, maybe."

"You mean that you promise?"

"Why, man alive, I've sworn that to others than you!"

Before he could question the cause of her sudden levity, she had set the jug in the road before him and disappeared, as swiftly as her brother had lately done, up the bank and into the thicket.

Exasperated by this last of her gazelle-like fleerings, he started to follow her, but was halted by a sudden doubt. In the roadway Teetotaler was sniffing at the cork of the jug. Parker joined him.

Had the girl been honest in her exchange of promises or was she playing a joke whose brutality she could not know? Was the test of his new-found continence at last in his possession?

His heart beating as it rarely had beat for woman, he removed the cork.

CHAPTER XVII

JUG'S BOTTOM

NEVER, felt Calvin Parker, had he painted with such power; certainly never with more speed. All afternoon he had been hard at it, working in an ecstasy of eagerness and strength. Now, in the good-night beams of the sun, he placed his easel where the light might reach it best and backed off to study the new picture with emotional, almost worshipful, gaze.

For the sake of perspective, he had pushed the deal table to one side with its litter of color tubes, brushes and bottles of oil. Also upon its cover of checked oilcloth stood the brown, gallon jug of his morning's compromise.

His gratitude on finding it full and the mountain girl as good as her word had rehabilitated his pledge to himself of temperance. Only through his nostrils had he drunk of it along the way, a scant two fingers of it had he poured to his first toast of the afternoon.

"For medicinal purposes only!"

The mild, crushed-flower aroma of the liquid, its clear-as-crystal color, its thinness, as of the pure spring water it resembled, made Vernaluska's warning seem a boast. But with the sear of unripened liquor through his mouth and throat he knew that the Metcalf distillation was not weak.

"And Old Tom disgusts bad liquor," he made comment aloud to Boomer and his mate who, according to custom, had dropped in to lunch. "Up to date, this popskull is the only thing I've met in the Blue Ridge that's short on time—time to get mellow. Yet maybe it's only the first drink that burns." He turned to the jug. "Wonder how many of those temperance two-fingers are in you?"

Dipping the handle of a paint brush into its small neck, he tested its wet capacity, indicating the height thereof with a circle upon the brown outside.

His after-luncheon, clock-timed cultivation of the enemy whom he had sworn to make his friend somehow brought him loneliness, rather than companionship.

Why had he traded in that promise to give up what he had set himself to achieve—the location of the Metcalf still? With a little dickering, he might have saved himself that diversion and also the whisky. He had sold out too cheap. A single gallon was no price at all for his word of honor to stay on his side of Roaring Fork until the girl of the hills gave her permission that he cross.

He wished he could see her at once. If she had not been inclined to believe in him, to like him, despite her manner, why had she acted as she had done?

There had been amusement behind her return promise that she would seek him out; was this at his expense? Would she ever seek him?

The eyes of Sylvia's photograph peered mildly down from the mantel through the smoke, as if asking why he should feel alone, with her in his memory. A surge of loyalty caused him to pour a draft, gen-

erous as his feeling of apology, and throw it off at a gulp.

"So small, so vaguely sweet, so frail—yet the great reward of victory," he toasted her.

But the response of a photograph was necessarily limited. Parker's sense of loneliness increased when the Boomers, having feasted to repletion on the guests' share of his lunch, began long absences of carrying tidbits to the kiddies in the armored pine.

For the first time he tried to catch them. He wanted to pet them, to show them his affection. Each time he lunged after them, however, they barked squeakily, as with terror, and eluded his open hands. Finally they scampered over the sill, not to reappear.

"Why does Vernaluska—you—everybody run away from me?"

From the checkered oilcloth, the mouth of the jug grinned in derisive reproach.

"That's so; there's you left, friend jug. Beg your pardon." He bowed humbly and allowed himself to sip from its good cheer.

Before many more such sips inspiration came, took charge of a lagging afternoon. An attractive idea came to him, grew in appeal, finally controlled both hands and mind.

Why need he ever be alone, Calvin Parker, who was said by the critics to possess the ability to create personalities from tubes, brushes, oils? This ever-fleeing mountain girl—he would catch her on canvas and make her stay. From first glimpse he had intended to paint her, to attempt combining that marvelous softness and brilliancy of her hair.

What was it which the look of her, the spirit of

her, the name of her had suggested all along?

In her was combined delicacy with force, hope built on fear, life that was young, alluring, colorful—life that sprang from what? Why was she like the rhododendron flower that lifted its face straight to the sun from a bank of the winter's dead leaves?

Ah, he had it at last!

She was Spring. That was why she was so elusive, yet so strong. That was why her smiles suggested tears shed. Her very life meant past death. She was Spring. To him she was not Vernaluska, not "Verney," but *Verne*.

His rapid sketch was reminiscent of her unexpected appearance that morning from the roadside thicket—reminiscent, yet far from literal. No lavender gingham clothed her form, no country shoes her feet. As the painter stood now at eventide, surveying his work, a frenzy of gratitude possessed him for the license allowed to art.

From a background of brush, with only here and there a sprouting thing to suggest the season, the girl fled toward him on bare feet, her dazzling body revealed through a fluttering drapery of young green, her hands outstretched, eyes side-glancing with a look of anxiety lest she be outsped, lips curved with a tremulous, promising smile. Like a veil of spun copper from about and above her floated backward her hair. Boldly beneath, Parker had painted his title:

SPRING IS HERE

"And here to stay, you darling, you beauty; here to stay!" he exulted, addressing her aloud, adoring her closer and closer in the waning glow from the

west door. "It's time to light the night-lights, but you cannot run away. It's time for supper—to-night you'll have to watch me while I eat. You cannot mock me any more, you cannot deny me. For you're Spring-time, and you can't help being as sweet to me as to any other man."

A moment he spared from her in which to be pleased with himself. He lurched about the shack, found and lit the candles. Steadying himself against the mantel-shelf, he surprised more than mild interest in Sylvia's flower eyes. The approval which she would have felt could she have watched him this afternoon beamed on him from the steel print. After she had toasted him, he toasted her. Then, having made his peace with her, he drank once more to Verne. Pulling his camp-stool close and seating himself, that he might look up under the lashes of her timorous eyes, he sipped a wee drop while he talked with her.

He had her at last, tricky jade, he told her. He would not be lonely any more. Let the father and mother shadow-tails desert him for their squirrel-ettes in the pine; he need not care. She could not leave him night or day. The white fire from her father's jug had thrown a flashlight on her, had revealed her to him as she was. Her occasional intolerance was her protest against the prick of thorns in the brush from which she came, the hurt of stones along her life-path. Now that he understood her, now that he had caught and could hold the spirit of her, she would learn to like to stay.

"You are here, you are mine—youth, power, sentience," he whispered to her and to himself, tears stumbling down his exalted face, even as the liquor

drizzled to the floor from the glass in his shaking hand. "Do you mind, Verne? Sweet, I *hope* you do not mind."

Next moment, remembrance mixed his metaphorical intensity. He chuckled in reassurance, tipped the glass to his lips, let the overflow of his hurry mix with the salt-drops on his chin.

Had she not been predisposed toward him from first sight? If not, why the exertion to drag him from the mud, to wipe his face, dig out his ears? Why that memorable smile at the post-office, the visit to his cabin, the silent protectorate of him against her father's possible outbreak, her culminative presentation of the jug? She was a woman; he must make allowances for that; a woman with probably more than the average woman's contradictory ways. All mere man could do was to fasten his eyes on fact. And each fact, despite her words, her every act, had favored him.

Supper seemed a prosaic thing by contrast with the successive toasts he drank to Verne and himself, so he put it off. Again curiosity keen as anxiety cause him to dip the paint-brush handle into the mouth of the "bust-head" jug. At first he felt somewhat disconcerted to note that it was almost half-empty. Next moment he decided that he might as well drink an even half of the "bumblings" before he ate—let them sting him into a first-class appetite if they could! Another circle of measurement he painted around the brown jug.

Gyrating once toward Sylvia, he anticipated a possible reproach. It was a long, long way to the bottom of the jug, he told her, when a man could paint under its influence as he had done that P.M. And

he wanted her clearly to understand that it was from no interest in the concrete of his subject that he had been inspired to such results. Vernaluska Metcalf was a beautiful girl, truly, and a girl with lure, doubtless, for certain men of the wild; but it was the spirit behind her personality that he had put upon canvas, a conception which her looks merely aided to express.

"Y'understand, dear? But of course you do!" he apostrophized as glibly as his thickened lips would permit. "To women I am all artist; to you only, the one woman, am I man. We Parkers love well and once."

To entertain his receptive audience became his concern. For them he recited "The Rubric of Rum," a composition of his own, relic of college days when people laughed at the tendency which later they deplored. In this metered effort were consigned to verse the various excuses offered by various mortals for their libations. They drank to warm up in cold weather, they drank to cool down in hot. Good fortune deserved a celebration, bad luck a beaker to console. At birth was uncorked sparkling wine for the christening, at death sustaining brandy for the wake. Friendship tipped the loving-cup, enmity the poison-draft of hate. It mattered not, through the vicissitudes of life—Thirst supplied his own glib excuse.

Parker, declaiming such fragments of his literary achievement as came to mind, gesticulated and bowed with animation, if not dramatic effect, first to one, then the other of his audience. His eyes were fervid; his grin sardonic. By way of realism, he tossed off a drink with each metered citation.

What if he did get a bit tipsy reciting his "Rubric of Rum," he once lapsed into prose to argue? Thirst had inspired it—let Thirst then pay the piper!

The brilliance with which his intemperance always had been associated called for more lights. In his larder he found an unopened candle-box. Dripping grease for sockets in half a dozen available places, he proceeded worthily to illuminate the occasion. Although the effect in the rough-boarded shack was not exactly garish, he was pleased. Whole-heartedly, he drank to the general good-cheer.

"Electric-lighted N'York's got nothing on Fall-away—while the candles last. Here's to Spring, who's brought us life!"

Before each of his fair, lip-tight guests he held a potion; then, in response to their gentle suggestions, obliged by the consumption thereof himself. Tacking against the headwind of intoxication, he introduced and explained one to the other.

Who had sent him to the Blue Ridge for his own best good, in quest of the "grip" which he had got? His valley lily of the conservatory, his Sylvia.

Who had angered him with her criticism? Who but the rhododendron girl. Who had helped him with her ridicule, had appealed with her very aloofness, had diverted his search for the regional illicit brew, then had set at his feet the fiery draft for devils or gods? None but Vernaluska, fitly named for a mountain in her mystery and uncompromising power, yet wafted over by a spirit as delicious, as balmy, as virile as the winds of early May.

"And you'll stay, Verne; you'll stay, won't you, Verne?" he cried in a recurrence of maudlin entreaty.

Emotion wobbled his knees. He lurched sideways into a chair beside the table, stretched both arms across its checkered oilcloth toward the radiant being stepping so daintily, fearsomely, shyly toward him.

"You've brought me life—you'll not take it away?" he sobbed. "You'll stay with me and like me and let me like you? Couldn't you promise me never, never to go?"

His face fell into his clutching hands. The shoulders built for such strength shuddered weakly, then held still. Only a waggle of the dark, attractive head resented a sudden crash that sounded from the puncheon floor.

The gallon container had been knocked over on its side, had rolled to the edge of the table and over. But not a drop of liquid wasted from its derisive little mouth.

As it chanced, Calvin Parker had reached the bottom of his jug.

Screaming pain awakened his other mind. Ordered by that greater voice, so often raised in the cause of drunkards, his body staggered up; the physical of his eyes stared about him, crazed from suffering. The candles on the table had burned to stubs; one sleeve of his coat was smoldering over seared flesh.

Ordered again, he lunged across the room to the water-pail, uttered a gasping cry as he sizzled his arm into it, turned and searched the gloom in a half-conscious fear lest Verne also be endangered by flame.

He located her, peering at him from the drawing-

stand, shy, sweet, reassuring. He started toward her, meaning to clutch one of the outstretched hands and lay it upon his wound in the conviction that such strong, long fingers must have curative power. But at a hostile sound he stopped and glanced behind.

The back door had blown open; wind was leveling the flame of such candles as still stood. Something had rushed in beside the wind—something black, darting, winged. It batted the walls, struck the puncheon of the floor, rose in swift, astonishing spirals.

It was not Parker's subconsciousness that apprehended the nature of the disturbance which was shaking him with fear more hideous than the pain of his arm. The small, awakening fraction of his conscious mind, rather, bade him leap after it in urgent terror—terror not so much for himself as for Verne, who had come to stay.

The thing which had entered was an enemy airplane, the purpose of the demon at the controls to seize and bear away his spirit of Spring. Deviously, to confuse him, it was darting hither and yon, but its objective could not be in doubt. So; he would meet artifice with superior artifice!

Don Quixote had fought windmills—a small issue compared with the tilt in prospect. One aviator would wish he never had quit his airdrome. With a bestial snarl of challenge, Parker crouched low near the canvas. Just let this winged intruder make the attempt—let him swoop nearer if he dared! Crushed fuselage, twisted tail and broken wings—into what a wreck would the machine be twisted! The shock-absorber or stabilizer was not built that

could withstand that superman, Cal Parker, under threat of the unspeakable deprivation.

The thing approached, evidently banking for an easy turn. The moment for counter-attack was about to come—*had* come.

With all the power of his vitriol-fed limbs, Parker shot into the air. He reached, he clutched the outspread wings of the enemy plane. He brought it down. With giant-strong fingers, he crushed and tore it as together they fell. Only when sure that it would never move again, did he collapse, in a deathlike sprawl, upon the floor.

CHAPTER XVIII

SPRING IS HERE

THE day was new-born, fragrant of breath, dewy-eyed. From the Metcalf clearing rode a colorful maid upon a white, red-legged steed—Vernaluska and Solomon, starting betimes to a full day's work.

They did not, however, turn into a certain well-worn path on the homestead side of Roaring Fork. Tucking up her green "habit" around her lifted feet, the rider put the little beast to the stream. With only a waggle of the longest ears in captivity did Solomon protest her guidance. Then he dipped his slim legs into the flood, felt with care for loose or slippery stones, gallantly convoyed across the mistress who could decide no wrong. Into the woody trail on the other side he padded with a noiseless, swinging gait.

From the first Vernaluska had fulfilled with system and good-cheer the duties of the office which she had won against such odds. Any inherent repugnance for the act of spying had been promptly allayed by a thought of still more repugnant possibilities, had not the mercurial Sandyred, Rex Currie and her father been overcome in discussion. So now she leaned forward to tickle Solomon's forehead in the spot of keenest mule delight, and adjured him to enjoy, as she tried to do, their service to the family.

"Pretend like we're taking a pleasure voyage. The woods are an ocean of perfume. You-uns, Sol, are my boat."

She breathed deeply the salt, crisp tonic of green in the shrubbery that already surged over the ridge-side—the dogwood blossoms that gleamed like phosphorescence on southern seas; the vari-tinted azaleas that flamed atop, wave after wave, as of burning oil on the surface of gently swelling billows.

Making a considerable détour into a sunlit meadow, where thrived a patch of tall, black-hearted yellow flowers, she consulted the popular necromancer known as "Susan" on love. After reaching down for a flower, she began to tear off its yellow rays.

"Does—don't. Me—another. Does—don't. Me another. Does—don't." Thus she chanted as she pulled.

The destruction of the daisy, excusable for sake of its purpose, continued until but one ray clung to the black heart of wizardry. This she withdrew tenderly and pressed to her lips.

"He loves me!" she cried in so triumphant a voice that a near-by pine warbler performed a spiral, and the beast under obligation of his name to be so wise cut quite a caper.

When Solomon was hidden at the mouth of Scapecat Run, Vernaluska approached the cabin on the Rim with the usual caution of her matutinal watch. She found a lapsing silence that had not been the rule of other mornings. Fear clutched her—a fear which the presence of the pinto stamping in his shed could not reassure.

Had the out-Norther for once slipped away be-

fore her arrival? Had he suspected that other reason behind her presentation of the jug? Under condonation of his official duty, had he broken his word to her by starting at dawn to run down the family still? She stepped into the open, crossed the small clearing, entered the cabin's back door.

After the brilliant sunlight without, the windowless interior seemed dark. The girl peered along the side of the room which came first into focus. The bunk was included in her glance—an empty bunk. Her face showed self-reproach over her dilatoriness. What sort of a one-man guard was she who risked so much on an assumption, even though since yesterday it had strengthened into hope?

Was he, after all, what they said he was? If so, of course he wouldn't wait around for her to outlick him!

Taking a forward step, she noted the long-cold ashes of the hearth and the table in the center of the room, untidy with glasses and greased over by small hillocks of burned candles. Gingerly she stepped among the chairs which surrounded the table, one still on all fours, two on their sides. Perplexity caught her that a man so immaculate should live in such disorder.

Then something really disturbing caught her eye. From the far side of the room a girl creature in none too many clothes seemed speeding directly toward her. "Spring is here," she read in golden letters at the elfin creature's feet. In a flash she grasped the vitality of the conception, stepped closer to admire. The flesh-tones gleaming through the veil of green; the long, yet rounded limb-lines; the young busts; the outstretched hands—all held her

in a breathless sensation of something precious to her and familiar.

The face—it was hers! Idealized, strange from its look of commingled fear and promise, whitened to a dazzling purity—yet hers beyond a doubt. And the hair—none could mistake her hair!

Vernaluska's admiration died in a flare of resentment. How dared he paint her in this shameless garb, the out-North spy? What had she said, what done to give his imagination license? Well was it that she had come to his empty shack to discover this desecration of her modesty!

On the floor just below the canvas lay a palette, still thick with paint. Upon the table were brushes. Stooping, she gathered them up. No artist in oils was she, yet she must fashion a dress to cover the lovely body. She would leave a sign of her visit calculated to show this man from lewd civilization the decency to be learned in the hills!

Her brush was dipped, her arm forward stretched, describing the line with which to begin her reconstruction, when a sound startled her. Turning, she saw what she had not seen before in the far corner of the room.

A gasp escaped her lips. The palette and brush she dropped to stifle other outcry with her hands. She sprang back, then turned to face the Thing upon the floor.

He looked to have been suddenly stricken, his arms outflung, his fists clenched as though for mortal combat. The sound which had startled her must have been the boomers scampering over him.

Terror palsied the girl's limbs, but not her mind—terror sprung from a grim suspicion which con-

cerned not him, not herself, but those closest to her. Had they regretted entrusting the spying to her, and decided to settle the stranger's fate in a quicker way? Had one of them shot him down—her father, Sandy-red, Rex? Or had the Dismal Gap wets thus flagrantly defied her father's orders?

There must have been a struggle, to judge by the disorder of the room. And those broken pieces of crockery scattered on the floor? They were, yes, the remains of her earthen jug. The shot must have been in the back, since no wound or stain showed on the trespasser's wan, upturned face or garments. Stepping closer, she leaned over him. What was that grasped in one of his hands?

The first doubt of her fears came with the discovery that his fingers would not loosen, rather gripped the harder on what they held—the body of a flying squirrel, one of the sad little rascals which waft their way into Blue Ridge cabins at night to gnaw everything except food that attracts them. This specimen had been viciously crushed.

Contemplation of the broken jug electrified her with hope. Gripping those extra-broad shoulders, she upraised the young man far enough to see that no wound showed in his back. Before returning him to the floor, she shook him with all her might. He shuddered, then slumped from her grasp and subsided into observable breathing.

She now saw that his face was an unlovely sight; that his lips were thick, his closed eyelids red and pouched beneath; that a considerable bump marred his forehead. Kneeling on the puncheon, she favored Parker dead-to-the-world with a kinder look than ever she had bent upon him quick.

"Drunk!" she sighed, her hands clasped prayerfully. "God dear, I thank Thee. Thou and I have done got him dead drunk!"

A goodly piece of the jug she seized and lifted to her lips.

"I have cussed you a-plenty, popskull," was the thought she beamed upon it, "but to-day I could almost take a sip of you. You've given me a right smart sign of what I want to know. Is it likely, now, that any revenuer of the slick sort Cal Parker would be if he was one—is it likely, I ask you, that he'd put himself at our-all's mercy like this?"

She tried to make his position easier and, in the gentle turning of him, discovered a hole burned through the sleeves of both coat and shirt to an angry-looking wound in his flesh. Gratitude over his condition moved her to save him what pain she could after sleep had quenched the liquid fire which was scorching his consciousness.

With his knife she ripped the armhole seams of his clothing and removed the sleeves. In the larder she searched for the box of baking soda which should have been there, but was not. Denied this likeliest first-aid, she looked about for a substitute.

Although Vernaluska knew nothing of Leech's ambrine treatment, that most modern method of dressing burns, she had glassed jelly. Inspiration came to her from the profusion of candle stubs. Examination proved them made of paraffin. If a wax coating could keep germs from spoiling her fruit preserves, she argued, it should serve as effectively to shut out the air from a flesh-burn.

Several of the stubs she shredded into a skillet, eliminating such bits of wick as remained in them.

After firing some kindling on the hearth, she melted them. While still hot, but not hot enough to cause further irritation, she poured the liquid over the wound, an air-tight covering.

To complete this rude surgery, she ripped a white towel into strips and bound the member with some skill. The placement of one of the bunk pillows beneath her patient's head, the smoothing backward of his disheveled, silky hair, the shaking of a reproachful forefinger before his face, completed her ministrations.

His unresponsiveness was broken by a deeper, shuddering breath, by an inarticulate murmur as of gratitude. Then suddenly, before she could rise from her solicitous position, his lids flashed up, his dark eyes peered, as if from far away, into hers.

"Verne," he murmured in a revealing voice, "you are here?"

CHAPTER XIX

SEE YOURSELF

AT sound of Parker's familiar tones, Boomer and Mrs. Boomer barked joyously.

"Delighted to have you again in our midst—deedlighted!" they seemed to say.

Vernaluska sprang to her feet and backed away. She watched the young man curiously as he sat up on the floor, cast a confused glance around, started to lift his right hand, then substituted the left with which to clasp his forehead.

"Will you give me a drink, please?"

A broken bit of the erstwhile container she pushed toward him with one toe of her clumsy, country shoes.

"You've done given yourself all the drinks that were."

"I mean water—a drink of cold water."

At the suffering note of this specification, she took a tin cup to the bucket outside and brought it to him brimming. Again he started to use his right hand, again substituted the left.

"Thank you," he said, both before and after draining the cup. Then: "Would you mind getting me another?"

This he accepted with the same confusion of impulse—thanked her, drained it, thanked her again. Later he lifted and examined his right hand and

arm. The blanched, twisted look of his face showed that he was beginning to realize the pain of it. His next words showed, too, that he appreciated the nature of the dressing.

"Who was it told me," he puzzled, "that you have the healingest hands in the world?"

The girl made no reply, but that he did not seem to miss.

He was holding his forehead tightly with his left, his eyes staring from under at the mangled remains of a little, red, furry body nearby.

"Only a wretched squirrel, torn limb from limb," he said. "And I thought——"

An urgent look came into his face. His left hand, lifted to the table top, helped him to his feet. He crossed the room to his easel.

"Thank God for His miracles!" he exclaimed on seeing the painting unharmed. Into a chair just behind he sat down suddenly. "Tell me, what do you think of it?" he asked the girl.

"What do *I* think?"

The fierce repetition shot like a bullet into his dulled sensibilities. He turned to look at his picture's original. She had retreated to the fireplace. When his glance met hers, she covered her face with both hands.

"Do you reckon any nice girl would admire to be insulted thataway?" she demanded in turn. "Did you count on my not recognizing it? You get a likeness too good for that—better than the last revenue sneak—than any of them."

The young man arose and approached her, his effort to get above the miseries of his mind and body apparent. The fact that she deliberately turned

her back upon him brought increased force to his halting plea.

"Verne, you still think that of me? If I were not what I say I am, you might accuse me of insulting you, but think a minute. Lord knows I have no reason to be vain about myself, but does my work look like that of a pretender? I am a good many things I ought not to be, but I am not a revenueur. The best of me—the artist of me—painted you, not the man. I am happy—almost prayerful in my happiness that you see yourself in it. If my mother were living, Verne, I should want her to know you—to see the fine creature whom I—I——"

He paused, confused over the delicate task of overcoming the outraged modesty of this girl so close, yet not close enough, to Nature.

She seemed not to have heard him. Her eyes were on the mantel shelf. He noted with her the hardened puddles of wax from last night's illumination. At one end stood the photograph of Sylvia in its purple leather frame.

Her attention settled upon the alluring, pictured face. She gazed upon the flower eyes, the gentle lips, the cloud of ash-blond hair lighted by a master photographer into a haloesque effect, the depths of the décolletage which revealed more than it concealed the attraction of girlish curves.

To Parker the moment seemed long before Vernaluska turned and, for the first time since his stupor, really looked at her inebriate. The red of her outspoken resentment still mottled her cheeks, but her eyes held a question. Her lips opened, as if about to voice it, then closed in a stiff line.

"That," Parker answered, "is a picture of the

woman I always have respected most in the world—that is, most until I met you.”

“Is she, then, a woman grown?” Vernaluska’s surprise seemed genuine. “I calculated she was just a child.”

He nodded. “Looking at it, I never notice that the subject isn’t completely dressed. We think a whole lot more of the beauty in which God Himself clothes a woman—we artists—than of what her dressmaker supplies. You have artistic appreciation, too, Verne. Don’t you agree with me?”

“I reckon a collar of any goods, even a flower, would spoil her,” the girl of the mountains admitted.

Her glance swerved, from a guilty remembrance of the correction of his painting which she had been about to make when the first move of his return to consciousness had interrupted.

“Likely you don’t mean any harm using my face and my”—she hesitated, then finished bravely enough—“my hair in your picture. Likely I’m too particular about myself. You see, I’ve never worn what you city folk would call a party dress. I had a graduation one, though—white organdy with a lavender sash. It cost several jugs of bumblings. The girls at the school over across the mountains said it was beautiful, but, at that, it wasn’t what your kind would call a party dress.”

“You child—you real girl!” Above his pity for himself, pity for her arose in Parker that she had missed the thousand-and-one soft perquisites of girlhood which her loveliness of looks and thoughts deserved. Returning to the table, he gazed across at her wistfully. “I am glad you believe that I feel

no disrespect in painting you as Spring. There is nothing now, is there, to prevent our being friends?

"Friends?"

"Yes."

"*Friends!*"

At her caustic repetition, he felt disturbed anew.

"Why not? You have shown yourself friendly in acts, if not in words. You must like me a little, or you wouldn't have been so kind to me ever since that first day."

"Like you? I *despise* you!"

Parker eased his right arm as best he could on the table-top and looked up at her, deeply distressed. "I don't wish to seem over-insistent, but if you despise me, why did you come to see me to-day—why that other day when——"

"Hasn't somebody got to keep watch over a revenue slick?" she snapped. "I persuaded my folks to appoint me for this particular job."

"But you took the cartridges out of the gun yesterday to save me."

"To save *you*? There's a nary thought in anything I've done except to save my pappy and my brother from the consequences of their foolishment. I want to get them out of danger from the law before the law gets them in. So you calculated I was keen about you—I, Verney Metcalf—because I'd taken notice of your existence, because I had my own reasons for toting you that jug of bumblings?"

"I promised—haven't I kept my promise?"

"For a day, yes. But you've done more than keep your promise. Whether you are a revenuer or not, you're a right poor excuse of a man. Look around at the cabin, at the floor, at yourself. Then

look at that picture and think what you ought to be."

"You think my picture good?"

"Good? It is *wonderful*! It is so wonderful that it, not you, has done wheedled me into forgiving you for imagining what no mortal man has ever seen of me. It is so wonderful that when I look at it, when I think——"

Her voice faltered in a sob.

Surprised, the artist concentrated in his regard of her.

She was standing before the easel, her hands clasped against the rounded busts which he had dared to portray. Something sparkled down the crimson of her cheeks.

Peering more closely, he saw, to his joy and dismay, that two tears had stumbled from her eyes.

"Verne," he whispered over the wall which she was raising between them. "*Verne.*"

"Oh, it ain't the looks of it that gets me—I don't admire myself enough for that. It's the—the——"

Again she fumbled for expression.

"Inspiration—the promise of creation fulfilled—Spring," he supplied. "My picture must be good!"

She turned on him as if to slay him for his exultation.

"I reckon I can pity a good-for-nothing unfortunate as much as anybody, but you——"

"Don't say that you despise me again, Verne. Don't be too hard on me."

"Too hard on you, when you've been given everything—a body that ought to be strong, a mind that ought to be clean, education, talent, training? What right have you got to be bound up in yourself and your appetite?"

"Just what the Parker fossils have always argued!"

At her stare, he amplified: "My progenitors, you know. They were a pretty decent lot, I guess. One thing is sure, they are more persevering dead than most people living. They never let up on me when I'm sober. That's one reason I drink—to get away from them. I won't let them or anybody else make up my mind for me."

"You mean you swiggle this way just from mule orneriness?"

"That was it originally—from perversity. But now I've come to depend on it for excitement. You see, I've been sort of a sensational drinker."

"And proud of it?"

"Not any more. What you don't see is that I intended never to be this way again. Being a Parker, I always keep my word to other people, and I thought I could keep this word to myself. I didn't dream I had degenerated into such a puny thing. I am disappointed and—and ashamed. I want to grow strong. I *must* get back my self-respect and yours. I—I seem to need help, don't I?"

She glanced toward the photograph on the mantel. "I reckon nothing outside a man's self can help him much, if he don't pleasure in cleanness."

"But I do—from my heart I do." Parker's face showed emotion. Haltingly, he uplifted a sort of prayer: "You are so strong, Verne; won't you help me to grow strong? Last night, before I lost myself, you seemed to be bringing life. That's how I came to paint your picture. If you have trust enough, mercy enough, won't you befriend me? Won't you—can't you even pity me?"

Her eyes were now full on his, consideringly.

"I can pity, yes," she admitted, "and I, too, can keep my word to another—to you, if I give it!"

"Then, Verne, inspire me and give me your word! Yours is the spirit of the picture—Spring, that can make things grow up from the dead. You find me beaten to earth from my long winter of gluttony; won't you help me to lift myself, help me to grow?"

CHAPTER XX

COURT OF HILLS

To an open place on the Fallaway's edge, Vernaluska led the way. From below, the valley smiled up at them with a million flower eyes, a million lips of green. On the other side loomed a semicircle of rugged peaks and tree-clad domes.

"Yonder is my court of hills," she introduced, before seating herself on the ground to face them.

Parker disposed himself beside her. His arm was relieved by a sling of her devisement, his inner man fortified by the coffee she had made and shared.

So far, her response to his plea had taken the language of action, except for one verbal comment that had carried hope.

"You say you-all's mother is long dead; likely you do need some homely advice."

Now, from the woods behind came the moaning call of a dove—a coo drawn out with many o's. Parker shivered. It sounded helpless, despairing, ineffectual, a good deal as he felt. He glanced up at the girl. She was looking into the view, evidently thinking. After a while, she began to speak slowly, as if picking her words with care.

"When I was a little girl, my pappy took me to a trial down at the county-seat. Ever since I've thought of the Blue Ridge as my court-house, yon

peaks as judge and jury. Turn to the left, stranger, and face His Honor, Grumbly Bald."

Obedying her free gesture, Parker again viewed the bare-topped dome that towered highest of the range.

"He's got a pesky temper, has Judge Bald," she continued. "Folks hereabouts allow that what's wrong with him is my being given one of his family names, but I say it's because dad's enemy, Dode Currie, owned him before he died and passed him down to Rex."

She identified Thunderhead and Keerless Knob, whose shiny cliffs, too, had lost their "hair"; Hickory Nut Mountain, down in the front row and hard to convince; Stretch Neck, tall and leaning, the curiosity-obsessed of the panel; the several suffrage members—Disputana, New Wife, Barren She, and Chunky Gal—these glowered upon by Big Butte, Whoop-for-Sam, and Standing Stone.

She approved them to her client.

"These twelve good mountains and true always render just verdicts because they share the highest ideals. Guilty or not guilty, what do you plead, prisoner at the bar?"

"Guilty!" he murmured.

But perplexity still was written plain upon his face.

"Don't you see what I mean?" she urged. "Nature is the fairest judge and jury. The closer we all get to her, the more we show what we actually are. In the cities where you come from there are high walls that shut out the sky and there are so many folks around you, watching you, judging you by their own standards, that you're plumb forced

to pretend. But now that you're alone in the hills there's no use to pretend. Nature demands honesty and, sooner or later, you'll be shown up for just what you really are."

"I shudder at the thought," Parker exclaimed, his dark eyes for once avoiding the fawn-green ones.

"If you intend well in the future, no matter what you have done in the past, they-all will temper the sentence. If you mean what you said in the shack yonder, we'll proceed with the trial."

"I mean it."

His tone was low, but one she could not doubt.

"And you-all will give honest testimony, regardless of how they press you?"

"So help me!"

He arose and faced the twelve as he took the oath.

After a moment he spoke to the girl. "I never really made up my mind before; other folks always had it ready-made for me. Never have I thought of quitting for my own sake; it was always to please some one else."

"You'll chuck out the lawyer you've been retaining?"

The ghost of the Cal Parker fascination limped in on his smile.

"Yes." He nodded emphatically. "His name is Compromise—the most famous of drink-control shysters. From this moment I place myself at the mercy of your court of hills."

His concentration on the metaphor was proved by the fact that he forgot his sling in reaching to help his new counsel to her feet. For the first time

the hands of the "out-Norther" and the mountain girl clasped—but guardedly.

Although he in his fervor had forgotten, she had not, his burn from past debauch.

CHAPTER XXI

"HI, VERNEY!"

THE bray of an ass was the third sign.

The first had been a note found by Parker tucked under the back door of the Rim shack on his return the evening before from an exercise ride upon Tee-totaler.

This had read:

Heaven Sent:

We take this Surreptitious means of communicating with you, realizing full well the danger of your seeking Communication with us. Not that we are impatient with your Progress, but we wish to help you, in so far as Strength is given us, to Victory. To ease your mind, we report that none of the Stalwarts has suffered ill-effects from that onward Razzle Dazzle, from the entombing of which your bravery extricated us.

What with the Carnival coming on in less than a fortnight, we Pray that you will be able to put out the Arch-Enemy's light-house before that Event, so that all may enjoy a nice, dry time in honor of North Carolina's stand for sobriety. Naturally, said enemy is stilling hard in order that the Carnival may be made a Riot of Wanton Wine.

We are credibly informed as to the location of a new Branch of this Pernicious Operandum. Directions will be furnished on application, by Sister Sally Shortoff, who misunderstood your Motives cruelly on first acquaintance. Do be Careful. And remember that each night our Prayers for your Safety ascend to Heaven Above.

Yours in the Fight for Right,

GLORY BE!

Guided by this capriciously capitalized, tiny-scripted, code-signed missive, whose authorship could only be that of Aunt Hootie Plott, he had sought and found the second sign that morning. The turn-coat manner and prolific instruction of Mistress Sally, at work in the corn field, were sequential.

She had not quite got his "color" that other day, she admitted, although she practically had given him the finest nag in the Blue Ridge, a transaction which she had ceased to regret only on learning that Teetotaler was thereby elected to an important office in the "cause." That he "take them blockade varmints in the act" was her advice. Strange doings had been observed through the brush by Bide and herself when out retrieving their "jump-devil" heifers a couple of days before.

Fearful of discovery by Old Tom Metcalf, who, of course was the "arch-enemy" referred to in the note, Sally had stayed only long enough to locate what she confidently believed to be a newly planted lair of the enemy. Aunt Hootie had advised trusting all to him. So be it. To Parker, then, the honor of uncovering the secrets housed within a padlocked lean-to built against the bank of Rattlesnake Run!

Now the braying of an ass, sign No. 3, rewarded his ride over the trail mapped out for him by the hill-country zealot. The refreshing sound of a small water-fall further assured him that he had come aright. He urged the piebald into a criss-cross fording of Roaring Fork.

On "yan" side the oft-branching waters he dismounted, looped the reins over a bush, and started

afoot along the indistinct trail beside the tributary. His going was the more eager in that the third sign, said to be the charm, had been that peculiarly tuneless, sea-saw bray.

His first triumph awaited around a bend in the branch—the sight of red-legged Solomon engaged in a strange occupation. Traced to the end of a long, curved beam, which turned an upright shaft planted in a box, the mule was walking, slow-footed, in a circle. Parker halted a moment to survey this motion-picture and the clay bank which effectively formed its background.

Where had he heard about the stirring of the mash, the mixing of sweet corn and malt, he wondered? That was what Vernaluska’s noble steed must be doing—taking the first steps in the making of spirits from corn.

With the probability that at last he had discovered the still-house of the Metcalfs; that now he could prove himself without design against the “cantankerous” by faithfully sharing the family secret, exultation started him precipitately forward.

Beside the grinding box, however, he saw at once that the mass being combed by the wooden teeth at the end of the upright shaft could not be any compound of grain; was, instead, a slate-colored substance which looked more like clay. As he leaned to examine it, Solomon stopped, blinked, drew back his lip—surveyed him, altogether, with an expression of intolerable levity.

“Be about it, Sol! Quit your loafering!”

The admonition came from the other side of the bank from which, probably, the clay under process

had been dug. It was voiced in the resonant contralto of the mountain girl. Solomon, with a grunt that might have meant either protest or indifference, resumed his plodding.

"What the Sam Hill is the idea?"

The mental query speeded Parker around the jutting bank. There he was halted by another puzzle.

The Metcalf girl was seated upon a low stool before a wheel which she turned with a foot-treadle; evidently she neither had seen nor heard his approach. Her splendid hair was uncovered and loosely coiled on the nape of her neck, which showed where the collar opened to be white as the flowers of a white rhododendron-bush just beyond her. Her print sleeves, rolled up, revealed upper arms of the same satiny, pure texture.

Very brown, by contrast, looked the long, strong hands which were shaping a loaf of clay into what resembled a gallon jug. She was sheltered from the sun by an overhang of boughs that extended from a small log structure built against the bank, evidently the lean-to of Mistress Sally's suspicion. Further, toward the creek, stretched a low vault, built of clay-chinked rocks whose chimney suggested an oven for the baking of her product.

Both disappointment and interest held Parker, that he should have found, in this supposed lair of the "arch-enemy," the sylvan setting of so innocent an industry. He stepped from the shadow of the bank, doffed his cap, bowed with that charm of manner handed direct to him from all the other Parkers.

"Good morning, Miss Potter, near your modest

cot, shaping many an urn and pot," he hailed her, with unvoiced apologies to Khayyam.

The girl sprang to her feet, glanced nervously back at the lean-to, then at him.

"Why are you-all trailing me this very first morning after I thought I had you settled to better ways?"

With a flourish of his cap toward her work, he continued his transposition:

"To see how you take clay 'from earthen things, from beggars' feet, and the head of kings.' "

Perplexity tempered her displeasure, then the twitch of a smile: "Do you-uns come as beggar or as king?"

"As both. I beg you and command you to tell me what the dickens you and friend Solomon are doing?"

"And I beg and command you to get about your own business." She turned her back, then added significantly over one shoulder: "Look out you don't get snake-bit going down the run."

He answered in metaphor: "I've heard a few rattlers since coming to the Blue Ridge, but I'm not afraid of gentlemanly snakes. It's hard to associate you with anything so wriggly and ugly as a snake, Miss Metcalf, and certainly you said nothing yesterday on Fallaway to forbid my visiting you in your workshop."

"I ain't receiving visitors to-day and what I see fitten to work at is my own secret."

"A secret may remain safe between two," he suggested, sauntering around so that she had to face him, focusing the sunlight of his smile upon the storm signs of her resentment. "Anyhow, your

mule invited my horse, so you have the wisdom of Solomon to blame. If you really do want to keep the location of your factory a secret, you should acquire a silencer—the sort your friend Currie has for his ‘charmed’ gun—for that bray-muzzle. Since I’m here, won’t you invite me to have a chair, fair mentor?”

“I certainly won’t—leastwise I can’t.”

The recalcitrant dimple of twice before suggested its continued existence as she plumped herself down upon the only stool.

“Thank you so much—a seat is what I meant.” Parker hunched himself down on the ground before her, both arms affectionately clasping his knees. “I think it is very clever of you to do your share of the family work. I wouldn’t for anything have missed this revelation of you making the demijohns for——”

“You think I make the jugs for dad’s bumblings?” With the interruption, she sprang back so suddenly that the large pottery piece which she had been fashioning, as if to second her denial, fell off the wheel into a shapeless mass on the ground. “You actually believe that I——”

“There’s nothing criminal in your participation, except telling your client fibs about it,” he insisted. “The law might consider you in the light of accessory to illicit output, but not I.”

“Say, stranger, you-all come along with me.”

She started toward the log structure. From the doorway she beckoned impatiently for him to hurry. Further arguments for the case in hand had been forming in Parker’s mind, but when he lined

up beside her just within the sill, he became speechless with amazement.

The hut was a storehouse, with shelves running around the walls, and without furniture except for two tables. Upon these were displayed earthenware of many shapes, colors and sizes, with not one among them that looked a suitable container for corn-juice. Jugs, urns, vases there were of brown, of vermillion, of green, blue, and gray.

With a murmured plea for permission, he advanced into the room and lifted one of the nearest into the sunlight shafting through the open door. An exclamation of surprise escaped him, for it was a vase unique and quite effective in design—its base the coiled tail of a copper-head snake, its body the inflated middle, its neck the wide-flung, V-shaped mouth. In it, both viciousness and grace were presented; the mottled coloring was faithfully reproduced.

Replacing the vase, Parker glanced wonderingly at the girl. She stood in the doorway watching him, answering his look by neither smile nor frown. He got an idea of her at that moment which he never lost—that she was proud to arrogance, yet humble almost to shame. So intense he felt her to be that he restrained any light expression and returned to her pottery.

He discovered a jug of the shape she had been turning on the wheel. Finished, it ceased to suggest itself as a mere container, appeared rather an object of crude art, its slender neck decorated by a design of leaves in bas-relief.

This he relinquished on espying one of a particularly appealing subject—a red chickeree with arched

back, upholding in its forepaws a pine cone, among the prickly leaves of which its sharp nose was searching for piñons.

"Wherever did you learn to put this life-touch into clay?" he asked.

"You think they have a life-touch?"

She spoke diffidently, but her eyes demanded the truth.

"They are rather exceptional, I should say. Of course, such ability to suggest motion, to copy colors, to effect differences of texture must be inherent, but who taught you modeling?"

"That came as natural to my fingers, I reckon, as teeth to my gums. Uncle Steve—he taught me all he knew."

She had made jugs, she further explained, since she had been old enough to play in mud, the word being generic for all forms of her work. The relative referred to, long since departed, had been an assiduous "jugger" in his day. Not until she had gone over the mountains to school, however, had she set any particular store by her talent.

"You wish to make a career of it?" he asked. "You can, I believe."

She nodded, then qualified her agreement: "I wish to make money out of it."

"You mean that these things are for sale? This Mr. Squirrel with the pine cone"—he lifted the conceit—"may I obtain it by right of purchase? It reminds me of—well, of some personal friends. How much will you take for it?"

"How much will you give?"

She took an eager step toward him, a flush of excitement staining her cheek.

"Whatever you think it worth—ten, twenty——"

"You-all talking cents or dollars?"

"Dollars, of course. What do you say?"

"I say——" She hesitated, in an apparent conflict of avidity and self-depreciation. "It appears like ten dollars is a sight more than it's worth, but I'd be right glad of the money."

Parker wondered at the trembling of her hands as she accepted the crisp bill he extended and pinned it carefully inside the pocket of her gingham dress.

"I understand," he said aloud, as a sort of apology for her lust for lucre. "The bank-note is symbolic, as it were, of the value of your art."

"No, sir, it ain't any symbol to me. It's money. That's what I want, and what I'm going to have. There are faults in my work same as in my schooling. When it's good, it's only a happen-so. But I'm set on improving my jugs just as I am on learning to speak fine, like you outside folks. At school I got a kind of understanding of English, and I downright enjoy reading. But somehow I get plumb—that is, very discouraged."

"All you need is a little application and practice, Verne. And, say, why can't you practice on me? Look at it as your rightful fee for representing me before the court of hills. Won't you let me be a pal, let me help you—that is, if you think I can?"

"You-all could help me a lot," she began, with an air of consideration, "if——"

"Hi, Verney! Where be you?"

The interrupting call, although from some distance, sounded raucous, impatient.

The girl made no attempt to continue. She stood,

a look of apprehension on her face, her body at tension.

She took a quick step toward Parker, then stopped, threw up her head, seemed strengthened by sudden decision. Turning, she hurried to the door and answered:

"Hi, Rexie! Where be *you*?"

From the path that shelved toward the waterfall strode a suitor who might have quickened the pulse of any girl—the personable hillbilly at his best. Carefully dressed in a new suit and hat, splendidly fit, his face alight from more than eagerness, he hurried to meet her, caught both her hands in his, leaned to see how it fared with her by a close look into her eyes.

"How come you back so soon, Rex? Tom ain't expecting you for a couple of days yet."

Currie did not at once answer. In fact, his lips looked too stiff to speak. A change had come into his expression, not so much from the doubtful graciousness of her greeting, probably, as from what he had seen within the hut when leaning forward to peer into her eyes. His clutch relaxed; he dropped her hands. All that light of something more than eagerness was snuffed out of his face.

"And you, Verney," he said at last in a low, dangerous voice, "I see you weren't expecting me, either."

Parker, appreciating that once again his presence was unwelcome, sauntered forward as he might have done to greet an enemy accidentally encountered at some pink-shaded tea-table of a mutual friend.

“How are you, Currie?” he said, and, from force of habit, extended the hand of the burned right arm.

But the hillbilly seemed not to see. He stood tense as a masterpiece done in stone, the ruddiness gone from his face, his lips twisted, his unwilling right clenched into a knobbed mallet.

CHAPTER XXII

SLICK AT THAT

FROM his talent for details Parker made a note of the fact that Currie had refused to shake his hand. It armed him additionally for the interview.

"I'm about as glad to see you," he added pleasantly, "as you to see me."

He held himself ready for any manner of retort, whether of speech or action. But Currie's reproach centered first upon the girl.

"It's the government spy you're so wrapped up in that you didn't hear me the first time I called, is it? Coming up, I heard the champing of a horse, but I wouldn't have believed, without I'd caught you breathing inside air with such as—as yon—that it was the one-eyed nag I heard Sal Shortoff stung him a-plenty for. I nigh sprained a good team to get back and help your pappy handle him, and here I find you—in this of all places——"

"And here you find me 'tending strictly to what's my own business and my pappy's, not yours," interrupted Vernaluska, in a voice, with a look, that warned him. "If you-all have got any manners, or even any respect for orders——"

She paused, her eyes held on the mallet of his fist.

It relaxed, fingers straightening, and hung more like a hand at his side.

"I may not be strong on manners," he admitted, "but you have taught me how to wait."

"To wait for what?" she demanded sharply.

His irides expanded as from some bold, preconceived scheme. "For two things, Verney. One is you. The other is Mr. Slick Parker, if he's still around when I get ready to attend to him."

"Mr. Parker has been telling me"—she chose to disregard the menace of his words and look—"that we-all are mistaken in his calling. He says it is only his private and particular business that is holding him in the Blue Ridge."

"It looks like that—mighty private, and damn particular," said the hillbilly, scowling.

"Ease off on him a mite, Rex," she said in a changed, coaxing way. "He's trying to be friendly—has done opened the way for me to make you a better offer for your mountain."

"His mountain?" queried Parker.

She nodded. "Grumbly Bald, that I'm christened after. I was telling you yesterday about how it came down to Rex through his father, who never would let my dad buy it because of an old spite between them. I'm asking Rex, as a personal favor, to sell to us what ain't—isn't any use on earth to him."

In the interest of his opposition, Currie chose to disregard the presence of the outsider.

"And I'm doing you a personal favor to flat refuse," he declared. "Your pap's a mite off or he wouldn't want to buy the worthless stone-pile, and you know it. I've got an idea that his hope of taking over my title is all he lets me stick around here for. You don't know a real friend when you've

got one, Verney Metcalf. Hell's fire, don't you reckon I'd be glad enough to sell it for money if it was robbing any one but you, hon?"

But Vernaluska insisted, and brought to bear the battery of her smiles as she stepped closed to the obstinate owner.

"Dad may be a mite off in wanting it," she said, her voice sweetening, "but since he does want it so much that he's sworn to me he'll quit stilling after he gets it— Listen, Rexey, I offer you five hundred dollars for Grumbly Bald, and here's something to bind the bargain."

Currie's eyes widened as she produced from the pocket of her dress a bank-note and fluttered it temptingly.

"Do you mean to say you took that from——"

"I've sold the first of what you've always said were no-account jugs—sold it for sure-enough money," she interrupted, with a triumphant look. "If I can sell one, don't you reckon I can sell many? There are rich folks over Asheville and Biltmore ways, folks that buy what they fancy and don't care particular about the price. I'm going over there soon with all Solomon can pack, and do some thrifty peddling. I'll have you paid off in such a jiffy you won't know what's been happening."

"You'll jiffy yourself into jail—that's what'll happen!"

There was no doubting Currie's antagonism toward her offer, although his eyes lit strangely as her face lifted to his and the hand fondling the watch-chain that spanned his vest-front grew additionally nervous. He reached out, caught the fluttering sleeve of her waist between his powerful

thumb and forefinger, pinched the cloth until his knuckles showed white.

"Verney-girl, what you ask ain't good for you to have," he continued his appeal in a lowered, husky voice. "When my one idea is to get you out of here, you want to go and dog-chain yourself to a mountain! Don't you know that when the blow-off comes, you'll be grabbed by the law same as your men folks?"

"Why won't you see what I'm getting at, Rex?" she insisted. "Nary one of us will be grabbed if you sell us the Bald. Dad wants to raise goats on it, and he's sworn himself to me, I keep telling you, to quit stilling forever as soon as——"

"You don't think he actually would? How soon?"

An arrested, uneasy look for a moment blotted the ardor of his face. But before she, surprised, could frame a reply, he was expanding the reason for his refusal to sell to her.

"Tom's idea of goats is plumb foolish. Not enough brush grows on the Bald to feed a dozen woolly grubbers. He wants it in the hope of getting shut of me, him thinking I ain't good enough to travel hitched with you. He's a mite silly, Verney, and you might as well face it. No ma'am—the answer is *no*! My own pappy wouldn't sell the old growling pile of stones to yours. He asked me to keep a hold on it, and I reckon I'll be bounden to oblige him, unless——"

"Unless some acceptable outside purchaser comes along? Say, Currie, will you sell me that mountain for five hundred cash?"

Parker spoke from inspiration. Possession of

Mount Vernaluska had, all in a flash of thought, become his dominant desire.

In the others the proposition aroused apparent astonishment. Currie dropped the girl's sleeve. The two sprang apart and faced him.

"You don't mean——" she began.

"What the hell do you-uns want of it?" demanded the hillbilly.

"I want to own it." Parker spoke convincingly, despite his quiet voice and tired smile. "Five hundred—on the spot."

Antagonistically the countryman stared at the New Yorker a moment; considered cravingly the girl whom he had elected "to save"; nodded with sudden decision.

"You're on," he said.

"But, Rex, you wouldn't sell it out of my hands?" Vernaluska's voice was a wail, her clutch on his arm that of despair. "If you do, you've no leave ever to think of me again."

Currie laughed in a hard way. "I'll be thinking all the same. I'm set on getting you away from here, and I generally get what I'm set on. If the slick's got the cash the Bald is his."

Pride seemed to outrun her protest. She withdrew to her work-bench; from a seat there watched the transaction.

With his left hand Parker drew a checkbook from one pocket and a fountain pen from another; painstakingly, with his right, began to write a check on his New York bank.

But Currie made objection. "A bit of paper hand-writ by yourself—do you reckon I'd take that? You said cash."

"North Carolina would take care of any man who gave you a bad check," said Parker, "but—Well, here's a New York draft which you'll have no trouble changing into gold."

From his wallet he selected one of the drafts which he carried against emergency, and endorsed it to Currie. On the back of a blank check he penned a comprehensive receipt which would protect his new interest until a formal deed might be handed over. Both of these and the pen he handed the hill-billy. He realized a return of his cordial dislike when Currie, after pocketing the draft and signing the receipt, returned it and the pen with a frank sneer.

"So-ho, there's graft enough in revenuing," he said, "that you can deal out a five-century chunk without missing it—and for a pile of rocks that ain't worth one crumble of salt! Looks plain he's meaning to settle hereabouts, Verney, until he finds the Metcalf still. Likely now you'll mark what I've told you——"

"I'll mark a nary thing you've ever told me, Rex Currie," flashed the girl, rising and stepping up to him. "You didn't mark what I told you, that my hope of the Bald was all I've been working toward. You needn't ever think of me again. Take your five hundred and——"

"And you, honey—I'll take you, too, never fear. You know I wouldn't ever go without you. You're a mite riled up now because——"

"Which or whether, get out of my sight!"

At her vehemence all his suavity seemed to desert him.

"You—you order me out before——" He stam-

mered, his face flared, his breath came hard. "You want to be alone with him—to hear more of his soft-soap—to tell him, maybe——"

The girl watched him, at first apprehensive lest he was about to end in a physical attack the contest with the stranger who, from the day of arrival, had outwitted him. She knew that he was still hurting with chagrin over his failure to ship Parker back to the railroad, the tale of which, spread among the wets at the Gap, had made him the subject of none too subtle jests. From that she could estimate how her benefit of doubt toward his enemy must enrage him. But this apprehension vanished in a greater one. She saw the look of crafty consideration in his face, saw that some new resolve had brought him self-control.

"All right," he snapped. "Since I ain't wanted I'll go."

With which he turned on his heel and started down the sheer trail that led to the falls.

Vernaluska crossed to the bank, peered over it, listened to make sure that he really had forded the stream, mounted his horse and started at a hard pace through the woods on the far side.

Parker stood watching her. Despite the manner of the hillbilly's departure, he felt that he had won.

"I'm some slick at that!" was his self-congratulation.

Tiring of the wait, he followed the girl and noticed a high, suspicious look to the back of her shoulders. He spoke her name; then, as she did not turn, caught her hand.

She, snatching her fingers away as though a dog had bitten them, faced him. The strength she had

shown before Currie was gone. Her lips were quivering, her eyes wet.

"I could have wheedled him in time," she accused in a broken voice. "I can do anything with Rex, and I hadn't hardly started on him. Why did you go and spoil my last chance of getting dad and Sandy within the law?"

He met her attack with a smile, a hopeful, reminding smile.

"I did it," said he, "to buy the judge."

Something in the look of him changed her confusion into hope.

"You bought it from Rex," she asked in the faint voice of one afraid to believe, "so that I—that we——"

"So that you can buy it from me. I prefer myself to Currie as your landlord. I hope that you'll come to prefer me, too."

"Will you clinch what you say, stranger? Will you take this down on the bargain and give me one of them—one of those receipts?"

Again she drew out the greenback which Parker had paid her only a few minutes before. She eyed him as intently as he eyed it; a return of sickening doubt showed in her face as she noted his dislike for it. For what seemed a long time, he considered.

"I will take it if you'll never call me 'stranger' again," he stipulated at last. "I won't feel at home in your mountains until somebody calls me 'Cal.'"

"It seems like the new landlord of Grumbly Bald ought to be made to feel at home, don't it, Cal?"

He marked the flush which accompanied her naïve acquiescence, just before she hurried back to her

jug-house. To its former resting-place in his bill-fold he returned the note which she had thrust into his hand; wrote a second receipt on a check-back, followed her, gravely handed it over.

"Oh, to think—to *think* that what I've worked for so long is going to be!"

The last of an ultra-sophisticated race felt a vicarious thrill from her joy lilt.

"It's a little out of my past line, this helping in the regeneration of two thirst-quenchers—namely, your brother and dad," he made comment. "But one's idea of what is and what isn't a worthy cause may change. I'm with you in this. To it I pledge my heart, my hand—my mountain."

He noticed that she had unpinned a small brooch from her dress, a purple stone framed by a flat, gold band; that the red-bronze head drooped with abashment as she held it out to him and said:

"Would you-uns be too proud to wear this in your tie? It would look like a stickpin, once it's in. I—I'm aiming to do you a favor when I ask."

"Proud?" Parker murmured. "It will make me almost too proud to wear it."

Himself as embarrassed as a schoolboy permitted to wear his first sweetheart's "friendship" ring, he took the pin and examined it.

"My pappy had it set over at the county-seat for my last birthday. Amethysts are my birth-stones, you know. What's more, they used to be considered a remedy for—for your kind of trouble."

"That's so. I've heard it or read about it somewhere before," Parker encouraged her. "The noun amethyst is of Greek extraction, made up of words meaning 'not' and 'to intoxicate.' The ancients

held that wine drunk from an amethystine cup could not make the drinker drunken."

"I wouldn't trust it against our popskull," warned the girl. "But I've been thinking it might help you. Leastwise, it can do no harm for you to wear my pin."

"You've been thinking of ways to help me?"

With an almost reverent touch, Calvin Parker pinned the country-craft brooch in his cravat.

"I want you to go now," she was saying in a more apologetic tone than he as yet had heard from her. "I—I'm kind of scared to have you stay!"

"Scared, Verne?"

In a rush of words she sought to excuse and impress upon him her nervousness. "It's smart-headed to be scared—*sometimes*. You've got to look out for Rex Currie. He hates you, I keep telling you. His mind is plumb set on getting me, but he's waiting for something—I don't know what. If I'm scared of his love, you-all had best be scared of his hate."

"You're not very complimentary to me," Parker objected. "I consider myself as good a man as Currie any day."

For just a minute she touched the hand that had seemed so repulsive a short while back. "You're as good, yes. But not as bad."

"As good, but not as bad." The reminder of the mountain girl's words some thirty minutes later was emphatic, to say the least.

Parker had turned from the main road into the narrow trail that led toward his cabin on the rim. His thoughts on the symbolic pin, he had dropped

the rein upon which his one-eyed mount was so dependent and lifted his hands to make sure it was fastened securely.

"Weak indeed will be your power, little talisman," he addressed it in thought, "if again I fall!"

An explosion as of a small cannon's discharge almost deafened him. Past his left shoulder zipped a hail of shot. Teetotaler sprang further into the trailside underbrush, toward which he had quartered from mid-road.

When Parker had righted the terrorized beast, he found himself staring into the double barrels of a shotgun, evidently the source of the cannonade. But the attack was not repeated, since the holder of the weapon, much in evidence, proved to be inanimate—the hardwood fork of a hickory that marked a trail turn.

"It's hard to enjoy nature, ain't it, old hoss, when even the trees want our lives?" Parker deplored somewhat grimly.

Dismounting, he investigated the mantrap—shotgun fixed to cover trail, hair triggers, improvised lanyard of cord so strung that advance of man and beast must fire the double charge. Except for the lapse of discipline which had allowed Teetotaler to sidle from the road's center, Parker's head or chest in all probability would have received the hail of slugs. And except for the amethystine brooch that discipline would have been maintained.

So, Parker commented to himself, it had been this rather elaborate conception, rather than Verne's dismissal, which had removed the hillbilly's presence from their midst!

CHAPTER XXIII

PARTICEPS CRIMINIS

THIS time the hounds recognized him. Instead of the bristles and growls with which they had tried to discourage his previous visit to the Metcalf home, they greeted him with yaps and whines of canine hospitality, then formed themselves into an advance guard of honor up the avenue of oaks. They and the heartsome good-night glance of the sun strengthened Parker's hope that the resentment of her who had forbidden him to come a second time might be diverted by the urgent nature of his mission.

His trip that day to Dismal Gap had been successful in the obtainment, from the hamlet's only member of the bar, two documents which, when signed and witnessed, would have a decidedly legal look. There had occurred also an unsought interview with that fluttering tidbit of humanity, Aunt Hootie Plott, which had filled him with apprehension for those he was trying to befriend.

It was after she had secured his promise to be present at the forthcoming annual carnival, which the drys meant should be a consecration service honoring the all-wise vote of the State, that she had put a second and more difficult request. Her words hooted in his mind:

"You must make a friend of Rex Currie. I hope

—I *think* he will soon become a declared convert of the drys. To be sure, he has been bootlegging for Old Tom, but not for love of the pernicious calling itself. Although he's been setting up to Verney Metcalf for years, he admitted to me the other night that he was about ready to give up all, even her. Verney's a likely favored girl, as I told him, but no female is worth going against your conscience for. Rex has sold out his property and is about to move away. But before he goes—well, he knows the exact location of Old Tom's lighthouse, so make friends with him at any cost to your feelings. Oh, I know it will come hard for you to forgive his trying to bundle you out of Dismal that first day, but with grace you can do it!"

All the way home he had mulled over this evidence that the safety of the "cantankerous" was threatened from within and clear had become his obligation to inform them. Behind the indolent manner which had come of his excesses was hidden—and in no wise injured—the dynamo with which he had been equipped at birth. The mechanics of this, set going, had started him at once.

The main door of the Metcalf house stood open. Smoke spiraled skyward from the second of the stone chimneys, which Parker assumed to be located in the culinary regions. Scarcely had he lifted his foot to the first step when Old Tom and Sandyred appeared in the doorway, both in shirt-sleeves. During the brief exchange of conventional greetings a large question mark formed around the two.

"Mr. Metcalf"—Parker crossed the porch and faced them squarely—"your daughter asked me not

to repeat my call of the other day. I promised her I would not and intended to oblige her. I hope, however, that she and you will excuse the breach when you know why I have come."

From his breast-pocket he produced the two legal-looking documents procured in Dismal. The appearance of Vernaluska in the lighted doorway that gave from one side of the living-room had caused him to make his words deliberate, distinct.

She looked startled and very lovely, her sleeves rolled to the elbows, the flush on her face probably from the kitchen fire.

He returned in kind the grave nod she gave him through the shielding shoulders of her men-folk. He could not decide whether she was frightened or angry.

"While in Dismal Gap this morning I had the local lawyer draw up certain papers transferring the mountain known as Grumbly Bald from Rex Currie to me and from me to you. Not until these are signed before witnesses will the transaction be legally binding."

"It won't eh?" Tom's gnarled hands outstretched, shook as they seized and unfolded the blank deeds.

The attention of the three was diverted from the caller; the old man's to a mumbling perusal, his children's to an anxious regard of him.

"Once I could get right and title," he muttered between phrases. "H-m, that sounds business-like—'to have and to hold.' . . . If I actually owned the Bald I needn't never fear the law no more—never no more."

The girl and Sandyred glanced at each other. Both copper-colored heads wagged with the obser-

vation—unspoken—that their father was forgetting to protect the liquid flames of his illicit calling in babble over the imaginary ones that seemed to be consuming his sanity.

"There's no hindrance now to your owning the mountain, sir, except Currie's signature to the first of those papers—which he is under contract to give me." Parker's interruption was in as brisk a tone as he could command.

"So Verney's done told us. She allows you ain't what folks think you."

"Nor am I. Is he around—Currie?"

"Rex'll be nagging in presently—he don't exactly like to miss a meal." Still clutching the unsigned deeds, the old fellow peered a moment straight into the dark eyes of the younger man. "Stranger," he said, after an interval that was taxing to all concerned, "we-all be just sitting down to table. Likely you'd best break biscuits with us."

"I should be glad to do so for several reasons," Parker accepted, "one, that it will give me opportunity to share some information with you which I think you will consider important."

"Nowise as important as getting these here papers signed. Biscuits first, then Rex, then your information—that's my program."

"Whenever you're ready to listen, sir."

At the amicable trend of affairs, the girl returned through the lighted doorway. Her brother, with a non-committal nod, followed her. Parker was about to step for the first time over the Metcalf door-sill, when the patriarch stopped him.

"Best outen your coat; you might as well be comfortable."

Instantly the scion of born-and-bred Parkers was about to refuse the suggestion, when he intercepted a glance toward his hip. Of course, he advised himself, the removal of his coat would show whether or not he had anything "on him" to hang upon one of those neutrality nails that decorated the door-frame. Amused by the old fellow's protectorate over his hospitality, he slipped the much criticized Norfolk off his silk shirt and hung it upon the nail which he might have appropriated had he been "wearing" a gun.

In the dining-room a table was placed so near the wall that a bench served for all except Tom, who had a chair at one end, and Vernaluska, who "fetched and carried." Opposite, a cheerful fire crackled in the grate.

Here Parker was presented to Miss Emmy, whose buxom figure and pink-cheeked face impressed him as in grateful contrast to the pallor and gangliness of such middle-aged women as he had met in the "sticks."

They settled in place, with the exception of Vernaluska, who could be heard in the kitchen. When she reappeared her sleeves were rolled down. She placed a spitted roast before the head of the clan. While he carved with able strokes, she added a dish of beans boiled in their pods, which they called "leather breeches," a pyramid of meal bread gritted and dried into pones, and some crisp slices of bacon. A plate of fresh-churned butter and individual dishes of berries, which Miss Emmy deplored as being home-canned with "drug-store powders," because of the late sugar shortage, completed the menu, except for coffee.

The beef conquered in combat, old Tom helped himself, then pushed the platter toward Parker, next in line.

"Light into things," he advised. "Him with the longest reach is always the best fed."

"Tom," Vernaluska broached when the meal was under way, "Sandy and I are agreed that it's right pretty of Mr. Parker to buy the title to Grumbly Bald from Rex, just to sell it over to us-all. Ain't we, Sandy?"

"We sure are." The younger Metcalf nodded, although there was qualification in his grudging tone. "What I can't see is why he's done gone and done it."

No opportunity was allowed Parker to explain.

"He had two reasons, as I see it," the girl continued in the manner of one making a foreplanned speech. "One was to give us practical proof that he ain't—*isn't* the revenuer he's considered hereabouts. The other——" She paused, drew a deep breath, then plunged. "Mr. Parker and I are good enough friends that I told him you had promised to quit stilling once you owned the Bald. Tommie, are you going to quit? Are you meaning to keep that promise?"

Emphatically the leonine head nodded.

"Once I get this signing done good and proper, once I have the cash in hand for what's stilling now, I'll never make no more. You know, Verney, that my word's bed-rock."

"Oh, Tommie—oh, Tom!" There was a clutch in her voice, but her eyes gleamed in the lamp-light like topaz. "How long will it take with all of us working?"

Her question brought Parker an idea—one that appealed at the moment as the superlative idea of his life.

"Wouldn't an extra hand facilitate things?" he asked generally, then faced the old man in particular. "Mr. Metcalf, what would you think of hiring me?"

"You?" Sandy snorted.

"Hiring *you*?" Tom echoed his amaze.

The question was italicized in the look of the girl, which shifted to meet his.

"Yes. Why not?" Parker answered all of them. His hand lifted to the little brooch of amethyst which was fastened in his tie and remained there as he continued: "Oh, you mustn't think I want to get my hands on the stuff; drinking I've given up, once and for all. For me to help you with your last output would serve three purposes. It would train me into the habit of resistance and give me the best possible start. It would show you absolutely that I am not a revenueur, and that——"

"Might show that you are," Sandy interrupted.

"It couldn't do that, because I'm not. Anyhow, you can see at a glance that if you employ me to help get out this last batch of bumlings——"

"Best wag your tongue tother way!" Again the son attempted his rather futile denial. "We don't get out nothing up here that we're scared of, I tell you."

"You would make me," Parker continued, regardless, "*particeps criminis*—an accessory to the fact. Don't bother contradicting me, Sandy, for everybody knows. If you people would take me in,

the same jail sentence would await me as the rest of you in case of trouble."

"Hell's banjer!" Tom was staring fixedly at his emptied plate.

Miss Emmy's pink cheeks were cupped in her hands as she watched for signs in the faces of her own. Vernaluska had crossed to the fire, a glow, as from its heart of coals, in her face. Noisily, Sandy began to pile the dishes he had used.

"Why do you make such a soon stack, boy?" the older blockader objected.

"I'm nagging it down to the Gap. Want to wrastle with the carnival committee about getting a good place for my refreshment tent."

"First, leave us argue out this *particeps* business. Like Verney's done said, we're obliged to trust somebody, and her selection might be just as good as ourn."

"That's sensible," Parker urged. "There's nothing gained by denying facts which I know as well as you. The Federal law says, Mr. Metcalf, that you cannot distil liquor without paying certain revenue taxes. The new State law forbids you making it or selling it. You, believing these laws unjust, proceed to violate them, matching your cunning with that of the authorities. So far you have succeeded, but if you delay too long, you are due for a stumble. The law's penalty wouldn't hurt you men so much as these women of your family whom you undoubtedly love and should save from disgrace. It was in the hope of relieving the strain upon Miss Vernaluska at once that I bought that mountain. According to her, it will give you a chance at another sort of living—a safer one—and you have prom-

ised to take it. Why refuse an offer of help that may hurry things?"

Old Tom had straightened from his lounging position. He was leaning over, peering at the unexpected supper guest as if dumbfounded by his temerity.

A laugh from the youngest Metcalf proclaimed him proof against such appeal.

"Slick as they come!" he pointed the counter argument. "Revenuer or no, Parker, you've got a prancy chance to catch us-all thataway. We're within every law that we cotton to and our women folk don't look as if they were suffering none."

But Parker persisted:

"I carry no preachment for reform, any more than I am personally interested in the collection of revenue. I do not assail the traffic because I am no longer a customer. My only interest is to see you folks out of it before things happen which I know are going to happen."

"You know, eh?" jeered Sandy. "And how do you know?"

"That is partly what I came to-night to tell you. You are in imminent danger from a source——"

"We Metcalfs are bred to danger, so best have done with this child's-talk!" The old man broke in impatiently. "Allowing you-all are playing square, Parker-man, we're obliged to you and beholden for the advance on the Bald. But we won't owe it for long. I got a hundred dollars ready, besides Verney's ten, and I calculate on adding a considerable sum after—leastwise, right soon. Once I get Grumbly Bald bought and paid for——"

He clutched the cloth and peered around the

group, a doting smile softening his rugged face. His voice thrilled with the tenderness of a young man for his love as he lapsed into what seemed his one aberration.

"Blue flames is what we-all are going to live and wax fat on, not goats, not wheat, not corn; blue flames that are burning the heart of the Bald. I ain't been chasing 'em my lifetime for naught. Come a day, and they'll blaze up at my feet. Come a day, I'm telling you-all, and folks will know why Tom Metcalf has done stuck around Roaring Fork. So long I've hunted and hoped—so *tarnal* long!"

The finish of his intense digression was stifled in a groan. His face fell into his hands. Through his whole powerful body he shuddered, as from repressed desire.

Miss Emmy dabbed at a tear that had started, staggering, down her cheek. Sandyred shifted position, his young face glooming. The girl Vernaluska it was who broke the uncomfortable pause.

"You can't blame us-all for wondering why you'd ask Tom for a job of helping." For the first time during the meal, she turned directly to the outsider. "Why should a man with the money you claim to have hire out to us? You allowed a while back you had three reasons, and you've named us two."

"My third reason, or, rather, the third purpose you'd serve by taking me on," Parker stated, "is what I'm trying to tell you—the chief cause of my presence here this evening."

All eyes, even those of the patriarch, focused upon him, compelled by his gravity. The yapping of the hounds without and the loudening, then dim-

inishing pound of horses' hoofs further urged him.

"By hiring me, Metcalf, you would be able to dispense with the services of Rex Currie who, I have excellent reason to believe, is no friend of you or yours. To-day in Dismal Gap, I was authoritatively informed that he was ingratiating himself with the drys. He wants to clear himself of the charge of bootlegging for you and has planned his getaway. Just what he is lingering for, I don't know; but I expect trouble from him and so may you."

A scornful laugh from the doorway sounded startlingly.

Rex Currie stood just outside, the look of him suggesting that he had slipped through the living-room in time to overhear the denunciation of himself.

"So-ho, you expect trouble from me?" he demanded of Parker. "Well, for once you're right, you revenue sneak! Looks like I've come in good time to start it here and now."

With every appearance of preparedness, he strode into the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

GUN-GETTING

FROM a stand before the fireplace, Currie addressed the group collectively and individually.

"You-all are fools—dumb fools—to sit here looking like charmed snakes at this gover'nment hawk. Sandy is too flighty to expect much of, and you, Tom, you act lately as if you'd inherited his wobbliness of mind. Miss Emmy, I'd have hoped better sense from you than breaking bread with one who has only the family ruin in mind. As for you, Verney——"

His voice bespoke a vital hurt as he turned upon the girl.

Parker slid out from between table and bench, crossed the room. His one chief realization was that he hated the hillbilly, had hated him from their first meeting, as never in his past had he hated any one. He was very angry, he warned himself; he must be careful.

"Odd, isn't it, Currie, that you are calling me the same names I was just calling you?" he commented, meeting the other's scowl with a suggestion of his lop-sided smile. "*You* have the ruin of this family in mind—that's what I was telling them. I have collected a few facts to support the charge. You can have nothing but unfounded suspicion to show against me."

A sneer first answered him. Then: "Good-l-a, you dare me open? I take that dare. What, Mr. Family-Friend, have you-uns got to say about this?"

From the inner pocket of his coat, Currie took out a letter, stepped toward the lamp, leaned to read the superscription.

"This billy-doo came in on to-day's stage and looked important enough that Asa Simms allowed I'd best fetch it special. Finding the party it's addressed to here saves me a ride after supper that like as not I wouldn't have got a thank-you for. Listen, you Metcalf simps, to the reading on the envelope: 'Mr. Calvin A. Parker, care Mrs. Hootie Plott, Dismal Gap, N. C.' "

Parker stepped forward, his hand outstretched. "If the letter is mine, give it to me. I never heard of such impertinence as examining a man's mail with him standing right in the room!"

"You didn't? Well, it's small fry compared with your impertinence being in the room. I'll hand over your mail when I'm through with the outside of it. That'll be enough to show the Metcalfs—you're welcome to what's inside. Look, you-all, at what is on the upper left-hand corner—printed there."

He showed them:

If not delivered in five days

Return to

Deputy Collector,

UNITED STATES INTERNAL REVENUE,

Federal Building, New York City.

His confidence rose as he noted the reflex on the staring group. "But that's not all. On the other corner—see!"

The Metcalfs peered to read:

For Official Business Only
Penalty for Private Use
In Evading Postage
Three Hundred Dollars.

Currie laughed again. "It ain't likely—not with that fine—that anybody would send our family friend a society note inside this envelope. Now, are you-all ready to see the slick for what he is?"

Old Tom, whose sight was none too keen, reached out for the missive and re-read the printed matter on the face of it, holding it close under the lamp.

A moment later the out-Norther found five hostile faces turned his way instead of one.

"The letter is easily explained," he declared. "It is undoubtedly from the man who sent me to the Blue Ridge."

"You don't deny, then, that you were sent?" Currie demanded.

"At Magpie Plott's request?" added Sandyred.

Old Tom worded his glare. "Do you 'spect we-all didn't know that the drys had begged for a slick to come down and clean us out?"

Still Vernaluska did not speak.

But Parker knew that she was remembering. Acute to what must be flashing through her mind as treachery in him, he reached out and seized the envelope.

"This letter, I know before opening, is of a strictly personal nature. That is foretold by the postage being paid on it. Don't you see the canceled stamp? It is from a friend of mine who works for the Internal Revenue Service, Spencer Pope, by name."

"Spencer Pope!" With a subdued bellow Old Tom pounced upon the name. "And you admit *he* sent you to the sticks?"

"Why shouldn't I admit it? He is, however, only a personal friend. That I can demonstrate best by reading his letter aloud. I won't even glance it through first, which ought to show that I have no fear of its contents."

He promised the girl with a glance, then ripped open the envelope and unfolded the sheets within.

"It is from Spence, as I knew it would be. Listen:

DEAR CAL:

We're leaving to-night for Ashville—Mrs. Brainard, Sylvia, and myself. It's out of season, of course; but Mrs. B. is interested in a place for sale near there, and insists on my advice as an original Tar-heel. So we'll all drop in to see you. It seems a way of killing several birds with the rock of one railroad fare. We're naturally interested in how many birds you've killed while there. Why your super-caution in not reporting through the mails? Are you overcoming the devils?

I hear they're pulling off the annual carnival on Friday next. So we'll take the stage over from the railroad that day, arriving, I believe, about noon. Sylvia says that in case you are trying to hide your real identity, as well as your mission in the Blue Ridge, under the disguise of a beard, you'd better shave for the occasion.

Hoping for a great report,

SPENCER.

Although the news in this characteristic effusion was a surprise to Parker and the way it was put most unfortunate, he now looked up with what confidence he could muster.

"There's nothing official in that letter, as I predicted. Here, pass it around and see for yourselves."

An angry laugh sounded from the living-room door, where Sandy had planted himself. "We-all don't need to pass it. We see a-plenty. Rex, you line up again' the kitchen door—lucky you're wearing your gun. I got one on the stoop, stranger, so don't try to escape that way!"

"I'll not try to escape," Parker retorted. "All I want to do is to explain; let me convince you that I——"

"You've done convinced us a-plenty." Old Tom put the verdict, but without the hostility of his son.

He sidled toward the seat he had vacated at table and laid his huge hands upon the blank deeds left there.

"I'm going to give you a chance, Parker, to make your getaway," he continued. "I'll call these boys offen you and see that a nary shot stops you on the road if——" He hesitated; shifted his gaze; seemed to be thinking earnestly.

Parker understood. He returned a significant, warning look.

"I'm obliged for the reminder." He nodded to Metcalf; then turned to the hillbilly. "The object of my present visit, Currie, is to get your signature to the deed transferring that mountain farm from you to me. You have cashed the New York draft?"

"I sure have—trusting you none!"

"Nor I you, so you're to sign up to-night."

"Ain't objecting, am I?"

"If you'll provide pen and ink, Mr. Metcalf," Parker suggested, "we'll legalize the transfer."

With a doubtful sort of glare, Currie turned on the old man. "What affair is it of yours, Tom, if I decide to sell what my pappy left me free and clear? Let me see this deed."

As her father's nervousness increased, Vernaluska intervened. Coming up behind him she took one of the documents and passed it to Currie.

"Best trust the stranger, Tommie," she advised. "It's all there is left to do."

He acted on her advice. "Pen and ink, Emmy," he ordered. "You, Sandy, hike to the barn and fetch Cotton Eye—we'd best have his signature for an outside witness."

The girl urged her brother on his errand. "Go on, Sandy, while Rex is in the mind. Go on."

"'Pears to me you've changed your tune, Verney, since the other day," Currie made comment on her eagerness. "What's come over you that you want me now to sell the Bald to some one else?"

"Oh, it's because——" She shivered, then lifted a warming smile to him. "You know I hate to say I'm wrong, Rexey. But I see it from your view-point now. Likely the money, cash in hand, is worth more to you than the mountain."

He corrected in a fervent aside: "To me and to you, hon."

Despite her effort at duplicity, she showed even more nervousness than did the patriarch during the examination of the paper which ensued. Currie read it as though looking for "jokers." Cotton Eye blinked at it like an ebony owl, regardless of the fact that he held it upside down. But at last came the signatures, the negro's in the form of an "X"

marked after the "Cotton Eye Lee" which Vernaluska had written in for him.

Parker blotted the ink with the lamp's heat, and pocketed the document.

"Now," he said, "we can get to the signing of the second deed."

"The second deed?" Currie demanded.

"Yes. I had it drawn up at the same time, but it wasn't worth much until after you had honored the first."

He and Old Tom duly inscribed their names; Cotton Eye affixed another X in the witness line. Additionally, there were notes signed and their accompanying mortgage, then a receipt was given by the out-Norther for the hoarded hundred. Only when Rex Currie saw the bills handed over did he seem to grasp the significance of the transaction.

"So-ho, you've tricked me—the whole passel of you?" he asked in the quiet voice of fury just before it explodes. "You've gone and got hold of that mountain in spite of me, Tom Metcalf! You really mean, then, to quit stillin'—to settle down inside the law? As for you, you interfering revenue reptile——"

He turned on Parker.

"As for him"—Old Tom had folded his deed and placed it within the pocket of his shirt—"revenue or no, he's kept his part of the bargain, and I'll keep mine." He also turned to Parker. "You can go safe of lead, young feller, if you take the straight road home.

But Parker's attention was centered upon her with whom he had exchanged vows of mutual aid and trust. Her expression was hard to read, prob-

ably through remembering what had been and what was. There was no doubting the cut of her voice, however, when she answered his eyes.

"We-all are powerful obliged to you for turning over the Bald to us. We'll make the payments and interest regular. But after that letter to-night, you can't expect us to be friendly. It ain't—isn't manners, is it, for a gent to stay after he's been asked to go?"

For a moment longer Parker looked at her, more hurt than seemed reasonable, in view of the fact that he could not blame her. When he spoke it was to the old man.

"Although I've always been dead set against doing things just because people told me to, in this case, I'll go and go straight if you'll entrust me with Currie's gun—I'm not afraid of yours and your son's."

The hillbilly started toward him.

"A gad-a-mighty chance you've got to strip me of my gun—you nor all the tricky Old Toms in the sticks! I'll show you what that insult calls for."

"Up, Rexey—I got you covered!" With the flash of a small weapon which she had slipped from her waist, Vernaluska stopped Currie's hand half-way to his hip. "You leave dad lift your gun. If you make one false move I'll plug you."

For a moment he stopped to gape at her. None could have doubted she would make good her threat. But admiration for her and craving for her seemed only to infuriate him the more.

"You'd plug me just to save him? I believe you would. Lucky I don't need a gun."

He turned so that Old Tom could take the Colt

from his hip; then, before any of them realized his intention, sprang upon Parker and bore him to the wall.

"You'll pay me—for everything—you've done—and made them do," he panted as he withstood the shock of violent resistance. "I'll get the girl in spite of you—in spite of Old Tom and all the other—flames of hell. My game's been quiet long enough."

"You mean—your man-trap—noisy enough," countered Parker, with the gasps of one who has just wrenched a strangle clutch from his throat.

"Now I'm ready to fight—to *win*," the hillbilly contributed to the rough-and-tumble. "If there's anything left of you—after I——"

But there was considerable left. Parker was proving himself willing and adept at in-fighting, with rapid-fire hooks and jabs which left his opponent little time for comment, when Sandyred threw his decisive muscular vote into the issue. Soon Currie was backed into a corner and held there under competent guard of the younger Metcalf pair.

After Parker had readjusted a loosened cuff-link and set his belt, he reached out for the gun which he had stipulated must be entrusted temporarily to him.

The deprived owner again offered objection. "Don't you go that far with your insults, Tom!"

When the old man had gone the whole way, he threatened Parker directly: "Gun or no gun, slick, you have a care for the next time we meet!"

With the commandeered weapon in hand, the out-Norther paused at the door. "The reason I wanted this gun, good folks," he said, "was merely to show you that I'm not leaving thus early be-

cause I came unarmed. Good night, all. Friday, at the carnival, I'll have Spencer Pope explain a little better than I've been able to do just who I am and why I'm in the Blue Ridge. Thank you so much for a diverting evening."

Turning, he walked into and across the living-room. At the door which gave upon the gallery he paused to don his coat. In the brief wait he heard the start of Old Tom's next attack.

"This here's sure a diverting—a great evening, Rex Currie, for its the one you pack up your fiddle and duds."

"Me pack up, Tom?"

"You heard me. High time you left off pretending to be one of us! I know dum well why you've stuck around, even though you don't know why I let you—you that's lifted your reviling eyes to my gal."

"Man alive, my eyes ain't ever been reviling! I'm wanting to marry Verney. I've asked her time and again."

"Natu'ly you want to marry her. Who wouldn't? But it's only a man that sizes up right before me that's a-going to succeed. You—a murdering Currie? I never did have no use for you, nohow, nor your pappy before you, with his concealing ways. The only thing I ever wanted of the span of you, I've got to-night. *I've got Grumbly Bald!* I'm going to be able to give Verney the chance she deserves in life and Sandy an education—if he'll take to it—and Emmy some old-age ease. As for you, I give you the go-by. An hour's good allowance for Parker—then you git and stay git!"

Cal Parker did not linger. What he had overheard, however, awoke in him the generosity of the victor. Before crossing the porch, he hung the weapon he had demanded upon the nail in the door-frame from which he had taken his coat. In the cabin on Fallaway awaited his own, which would best be his companion for the near future.

CHAPTER XXV

CONQUEROR OF HIMSELF

By Friday, the first morning of the two-day carnival which every year takes place between planting and harvest in this section of the Blue Ridge, Calvin Parker found himself in a stressful state of mind. When, about nine-thirty, he halted Teetotaler at Crossways, a point commanding the road to the Metcalf place, he realized the full discomfort of hope and fear.

And this was the day when he was to be presented to Sylvia, his promised wife, as the conqueror of himself!

The ironical smile with which he saluted the thought lost its irony in wistfulness as he realized why he could not rejoice. Yet it was well that he should see Sylvia and try to explain; doubly well that he should see Spencer, since only Spencer could win for him reprieve from the self-elected family jury which had sentenced him to the misery of the past several days.

Parker was waiting at Crossways because his whole future happiness seemed to depend upon winning back Verne's faith in him before he advanced proof of his good faith toward her. Yesterday he had sent her a note—but that was as a climax to much which had preceded and necessitated it.

After that evening when he had broken biscuits in vain with the Metcalfs, the truth had come of its own dynamic force. It had struck off all the armor of the Parker class distinction and left the last of that line unprotected from a man-power craving to which his past craving for liquor was but a puerile fancy.

Sylvia! Who, indeed, was Sylvia—what his feeling for her? Although he had thought he truly loved her, he had mistaken affection for love. His calm preference from boyhood for her companionship showed only negative value as compared with what had grown in him for this ever-fleeing girl of the hills, the ghastly doubt, the glowing hope, the desperate demand—the constant, unutterable longing to have and to hold her, to receive from her truth-speaking lips the benediction that she also loved him.

Often during those several days and their several nights, had he uncovered his portrait of her and sat before it, asking himself whether it was the looks of her which had enslaved his beauty-loving soul. And each time when he had turned his eyes from the sight of color and lines, his heart had swelled to bursting in appreciation of what made her loveliness so surpassing.

A rare creature she was. Were she plain, the spirit of her must have compelled his homage. Despite her lack of what his world called "culture," she had a mind of power; she had loyalty for the man who deserved it, measured best by the contempt she had shown for him who, as she thought, did not. She had tenderness as well as genius in those strong, long hands of hers. She had, above

all the pampered women of his world, the power to reward him.

And he would have it—his reward. He would deserve it first; then he would have it. This he told his clamoring heart again and again.

He loved the mountain girl with all the good there was in him; he must win her love in return. He had made and re-made plans for their future, subject, all, to her gracious approval. Firm was his intention that her pride should never be wounded from her past lack of opportunity. Never should she be put at disadvantage before his world. She should have what was her due, no matter what it cost him in self-suppression to give it her. He had been reared to selfishness; he would rear himself again to unselfishness. To whatsoever she decided, he would submit.

It was not to tell Verne all this that he had halted by the roadside. At mere thought of the dear temptation, all those dead and gone Parkers and Calvins rose up and reprimanded him.

None of either line had been engaged to marry two women at the same time, they insisted. They hoped that he would not be the first to smirch the family honor.

Before confessing the state of his heart to Verne he must confess to Sylvia, must implore her pardon and mercy. Sylvia must see that he would be wronging her as well as himself by further pretense of a sentiment which he now knew never to have existed. Theirs never had been more than a cordial affection. As he understood love now, she could not otherwise have endured his long absence without a word or sign.

It would all come right, once he had talked with Sylvia; once he had explained to Spence the predicament into which that official envelope and joker of a letter had thrust him.

The pull had been strong to revisit the Metcalf place, but a stubborn determination to show that he also had pride had held him back. Contemplation, however, had approved the construction of two notes, and their delivery had been assured by the way-laying of Cotton Eye Lee.

The one to Verne had read:

Should the attorney for the defense desert the prisoner at the bar in his greatest extremity and without a private hearing?

He has sought you at your claybank studio, but you do not come. He'll wait until half after ten at Crossways, Friday morning, hoping for a word with you as you pass to the fair. All he wants from the court of the hills is justice. Won't you help him get it?

The second had been to Old Tom, and was the outcome of an argument with himself to the effect that, since warnings were the way of the mountain world, it was high time he sent one himself. He had been troubled over the manner of address, but, as finally despatched, the second missive had read:

TO THE WISE:

The location of the Metcalf still is known to enemies. Whether this word be considered as from friend or foe, no harm can be done by heeding it.

"A well-wisher" was the least offensive signature which had occurred to him.

Pulling out his watch, Parker noted the time.

Ten-thirty already—and before twelve, probably, his friends from the North would arrive. He must be in Dismal to meet them; must welcome them as befitted saviors, since his saviors they were to be. He must be riding on. And yet—and yet——

Could he look for only one moment into those equivocally timid, fearless eyes whose last glance of reproach obsessed him; could he, without speaking an unworthy word, suggest something of what he felt for her, which must show in his expression, now that he knew; could he, by the very force of the truth in him, compel a retraction of dismissal from her—oh, it would be something to treasure through all future years that Verne's instinctive faith in him had voted down what seemed conclusive evidence!

So long had been his wait, so introspective his very expectancy, that the sound of hoof-beats on the other road was startling. Relief surged through him, following the first refreshing wave of joy. She was coming—of course she would come! His case was won, the final verdict as good as spoken; for, since she cared enough to come, she would care more and more, enough to last a lifetime.

He swung back the leg which had been resting negligently over the pommel, replaced his Panama, whirled his grazing mount to face the up-road. Straight and strong in his riding-garb as he never had looked on Central Park bridle-paths, he started eagerly into the Blue Ridge depths to meet——

He had hoped that chance was to favor him that day; but chance evidently had not gone on duty. There was no small white mule in approach; instead, a full-sized, black horse and upon it a man.

Parker's recognition of Sandyred Metcalf caused

him to turn and start along his way, when a hail from the rear stopped him.

"Hi, there, stranger! Got something for you!"

With a flourish the youth drew alongside and passed Parker a sealed envelope. "I was asked to drop this here in the box at Dismal, but it won't impoverish me none to save the stamp that Skinflint Simms would probably ask for passing it on to you."

"Your sister," Parker asked, "how soon will she be riding to the village?"

Desperation had impelled the question, for a glance had shown him that the letter was his own returned. Her name on the envelope had been scratched out and above it was boldly written:

Unopened.

To Mr. Particeps Criminis Parker.

"My sister says she don't feel like celebrating to-day," Sandyred returned. "She and Miss Emmy have started to clean house and that's some job. Dad—well, he's right busy, too. I'm late myself; ought to had my tent open by now. So long, stranger. See you at the carnival."

To Parker, starting more sedately than had Sandyred in the general direction, there seemed significance in the friendliness of this explanation. The finish, in particular, had sounded like an overture. Had the signing of the deeds, the discovery, after he had gone, of Currie's weapon on the door-nail and the obvious authorship of the note of warning made a favorable impression upon the youngest of the clan?

But it did not matter. Nothing mattered, except

that Verne had not opened his letter—had not come. Of course they all would believe in him after Spencer Pope had vouched for him as one in no way connected with the government. Since no other member of the family was to be present, the explanation must be put to young Metcalf. All that, however, would be as it would be. The prospect was spoiled by the fact that Verne did not care. That must be a fact. Had she cared at all, wouldn't she have opened and read his note? After she had read, wouldn't she have come?

Because his start was late, his heroically developed shoulder and arm muscles held Teetotaler to a particularly straight road and his spur provided accelerating suggestions. As it fell out, he pounded into Trade Street just behind the steaming black of Sandyred and in plenty of time to meet the stage which was bringing his friends to the vermilion village. He formed himself into a mounted escort of one to the porch of the Hotel Plott.

With what light-heartedness he could assume, he returned their enthusiastic greetings. Sylvia looked a vision, he declared; as, indeed, she did in her French-gray cloak and chiffon veil tied in a piquant bow under her cleft little chin, the violet of her eyes and Dresden flush on her cheeks brightening the monotone of her costume and silvery fluff of hair.

Mrs. Brainard never had seemed so superb to him as here in the wilds, he assured that matron with his hand-shake. As for Spencer—twice he leaned from his mount to slap that "best friend" upon the shoulders. Spencer was a treat, indeed, for an exile's eyes.

"And who says I'm not a wizard at prescribing cures?" Pope addressed them collectively. "Look him over, Sylvia and Madam—does my patient appear the worse for his absent treatment?"

Parker straightened for their inspection, like a trooper at "attention." The mother raised the outermost of her protective veils and applied a lorgnette to her faded gaze interestedly. Sylvia sent him her sweet, flower-like smile.

"I believe, Cal," she approved, "you could get a job in the movies now. You do look fit, and as handsome as Spencer—that is, almost."

"Now you *are* rewarded!" laughed the deputy collector, himself complimented by the form of her compliment to another.

Scarcely had the diminutive driver of the stage pulled up before the "only" hotel, when Aunt Hootie was bidding them welcome.

"If it isn't Spencer at last—Spencer Pope from down at The Corners!" she hooted away. "You are changed, my dear boy, but changed for the better, I must remark. Still, I'd have known you anywhere. Was more than delighted to receive your letter. So you've come all this way to cheer our brave friend Parker in to-day's stand for sobriety?"

Pope managed to get in a nod or two, but nothing more.

"The ladies are welcome, I assure you, as would be any friends of yours or Mr. Parker's. Hezekiah will be delighted to entertain some one more our class. Hezekiah is my husband, Mrs. Brainard and Miss Brainard, and a genius, if I do say it as shouldn't, at jumping teeth. Come right in, all of

you. Dinner will be ready as soon as you are washed up."

Afterward Parker realized that certain more or less surreptitious signals of Tobe Riker were addressed to himself. At the time, however, he noticed them only as peculiarities in the conduct of the little whip, and followed his party into the house without response.

At the overladen table was presented the doctor, who received the encomiums of his small mate over his varied abilities as fulsomely as he returned compliments to her and all their guests.

The undercurrent of amusement through that never-ending feast was appreciated by all but the Plotts themselves. A toe-prod under the cloth from Spencer Pope urged Parker's silence and a question or two from the same source started the hostess on phillipics of her hero of the day.

"Naturally," observed the deputy in his most official voice, "we are interested in the progress Cal Parker has made down here. Fact is, we're here for inspection. He has been fortunate, indeed, Mrs. Plott, in having the sustaining aid of a woman like yourself in the task cut out for him."

"Friend Parker is the slickest officer ever sent to uphold the cause, barring not even yourself," interpolated Dr. Hezekiah with impressment.

Parker frowned at the subject broached, despite Spencer's shake of head and Sylvia's incipient laugh—made to resemble a sneeze in her napkin.

"But I am not a revenue officer," he protested. "This nonsense has got me into a lot of trouble, and it is high time——"

"There he goes—won't let his left have the least

mite of suspicion!" Aunt Hootie's interruption was intoned rapturously. "Some of our brother and sister drys have feared that he was not moving fast enough, but I always remind them that he's playing a game against the most wily blockading fox never caught."

She paused to beam at Parker, but before he could check her, sped on: "Old Tom Metcalf has got a double reason for foiling the law, now that brush whisky brings double price by the gallon. It may sound easy enough to an outsider to catch him actually stilling the pernicious stuff, but it ain't turned out that way. Everybody who knows Tom fears his lead. I'd be sorry for his daughter if it wa'n't for the cause."

"So Old Tom has a daughter?" The deputy collector glanced quizzically from the little lady to Parker; then, with a nod of punctuation, to Mrs. Brainard.

Regretfully, Mrs. Plott gazed into the plate of steaming corn-bread with which she had been importuning each guest in turn. "Verney Metcalf is the likeliest looking girl the sticks ever grew, and a sweet girl, too, although the rough life she's been brought up to has kind of sharpened her tongue. I'd be all wrought up over the way the cause is using her if it wasn't that she countenances her pappy's crime. Verney will have to take her bitter dose along with her men folks, I reckon, since the wages of sin—you know. That is, unless Rex Currie can save her."

Pope's interest heightened. "You mean Rex, son of Dode Currie, who used to trade over at Horsepasture Cove?"

She nodded. "And a choice rascal Dode was said to be. It looked as if Rex, a right favored lad, was following in his footsteps, for he's been Old Tom's bootlegger for years, but I begin to see now that he's only been hanging around account of Verney. He's as good as told me he'll soon be on our reform list. We hope"—this last she sibilated—"that Friend Parker here can get Rex to show the way to Old Tom's still."

Although Parker had writhed inwardly at the discussion of the mountain girl, he realized that his position was one of great disadvantage. Seeing no way of bettering it, he kept silence, a smile of simulated amusement at the whole subject upon his face.

"I begin to see." Spencer was speaking, evidently in the abstraction of deep thought, under the spell of which he withdrew an opened letter from his coat pocket, studied its superscription, then replaced it. "Rex Currie resents the prospect of Miss Metcalf's being used by the cause, eh? H-m! I *do* begin to see. And have you, Cal, ingratiated yourself sufficiently with these outlaws of the sticks that you drink with them for the sake of the cause, distasteful as that would be to one of your high principles?"

Aunt Hootie forestalled her hero's reply. "Not he! I've an idea he'll push on to victory without once smirching his lips with the vile stuff."

"Do you mean to say," interposed Mrs. Brainard, "that there is whisky in these Blue Ridges and Cal Parker hasn't drunk any of it?"

"Not to my best belief and knowledge, high Heaven be praised, except a drop or two I gave him myself for medicinal purposes only! Set as I am

against the poison, I hold that a revenuer is entitled to enough to steady his nerves."

"Oh, Cal, that is fine—*wonderful!*" exclaimed Sylvia.

Pope gave up to a small attack of coughing.

"A drop or two—for *medicinal purposes only!*" he commented when able. "I reckon that won't do the cause or Cal any harm."

He thus lauded and surreptitiously attacked, abruptly changed the subject to the local fair. His guests had arrived just in time, he said. There was billed for the afternoon and evening a barbecue and dance which would draw an outpouring of queer types and hand-loomed costumes from the hills that could scarcely fail to amuse them.

"There's going to be two entire beeves," added Dr. Hezekiah. "If you've never tasted Nor' Carolina barbecued meat, you have a treat in store. And you need fear neither ruction nor cuss-fight, since, for the first time in the history of these festivities, we drys hope for absolute sobriety."

Sylvia at once expressed enthusiasm for the frolic, but her mother insisted on an hour's interval for rest after their jolting ride from the station. In this Parker saw opportunity. He proposed that Spencer explore the village under his guidance and return for the women at the end of the hour. Sixty minutes, he told himself, would be long enough for him to explain to Spencer the serious side of a situation which at first glance looked only ridiculous; would allow him to engage Spencer's authoritative aid in the statement which must be made to young Metcalf as soon as occasion offered.

Sometime before the festivities ended, probably

best during the dance that evening, he would separate Sylvia from the others long enough to accomplish his difficult explanation and plea. No matter how hostile Verne's attitude toward him might be, he felt that this explanation was due everybody concerned. The past Parkers, he knew, would approve. One of their line could not place himself under a lifelong obligation to make happy one of the dearest girls in the world when his entire self—mind, heart, body—was aching for the denied favors of another.

The prospect was not lightened by Sylvia's impulsive leave-taking of him in the hall, with her two protectors looking on. She suddenly raised herself on tiptoe, lifted her arms around his neck, bestowed the clinging, fragrant kiss of their childhood games upon his lips.

"You are splendid, Cal, to have been so good. I'd rather you'd be good than—anything. You'll tell me all about the struggle later on?"

The deep flush which mounted to his face was from embarrassment, but was misunderstood by the observers three. Yes, he assured her, he would tell her about it—later on.

CHAPTER XXVI

WAIT AND SEE

EXCERPTS from several brief interviews which took place all within that siesta hour stipulated by Mrs. Brainard's guardianship of her daughter's chief asset—her looks—will help to explain and condone much that follows.

Calvin Parker's statement to his "best friend" need not be detailed. While making their way up the middle of Trade Street, dodging the gathering holiday crowd, he had put it—and with strength. The joke which so diverted those who knew him best, he declared, had come to be too greatly at his expense. As he wished to gain the confidence of certain mountain neighbors, he hoped that Spencer would clear him of the charge of being in the government service before Sandyred Metcalf, whom he would introduce during the afternoon.

The deputy collector, although candidly regretting the serious finis to an amusing situation, had agreed to do his official best. He had expressed a wish to stop at Simms's Emporium to look for some souvenir cards for Sylvia. They were undertaking the steps when Tobe Riker, having changed to gala attire that did not at all match the portentous expression of his wind-weathered visage, recalled his mysterious signals of the morning by asking a private word with Parker. Spencer obligingly disap-

peared into the general store, while the artist followed the little whip to one end of the uncovered porch.

"I hope," began Riker, "you-all ain't holding no rancor again me for dumping you into the mud that first day?"

"Not at all. I was obliged, on the contrary, for the timely reminder of dust-to-dust, even though the road was a bit oozy for the application."

"Leastwise, you wasn't wet." The little man paused for the significance of this suggestion to sink in. After an upcast wink of solemn sort, he drew the "foreigner" further away from the window and continued. "I've been wizened since that the gover'ment sent you to snuff the liquor lights hereabouts."

Parker denied the reiterated charge impatiently. "Well, you've been wizened, unwisely, Riker! The government did not send me, and I'm snuffing no liquor lights except my own."

Again and even more solemnly, Tobe winked. "Which or whether, what's going to be can't be stopped, nohow. I ain't taking no stand, mind, wet or dry, and if you look for'ard to being staged out of here safely, you'd best not tell who told you-all."

"Told me what?"

"What I'm meaning to." The whip's forbidding glare eased as he glanced around. Inviting the closer attention of the artist's ear by an arm-tug, he continued in guarded tones: "There's a party not so far from here what plans to make a safe get-away when the law snitches off them he's been working for. I ain't saying which one it is, except that it ain't old Tom nor Sandy, and naturally it ain't Miss

Emmy. Twenty-five dollars cash has been offered me for driving said party with bag and baggage outen here whatever night the fracas chances."

"You mean Currie—that he's hired you to drive him out if the Metcalfs get into trouble?"

"I ain't saying what nor who nor near all that I might if I'd a mind to. I ain't wet nor I ain't dry, I tell you, and I could do with the twenty-five. But I have a kind of slight at suspicioning folks I don't like. Ask yourself why this party can't set a date for going if he's going honest and has the price. Somebody's inside Simms's store, what I wouldn't want to see me confabbing with you, so I'd best be skiting. But you just keep an eye on my passenger and, especial, on the baggage he takes the night when the law grabs that ornery Metcalf bunch."

Parker felt real concern over this guardedly meted information, although he had been in some measure prepared for it by Aunt Hootie's exultation over the "reform" of Currie. The pointed questions which he put, however, were all blunted by mysterious replies.

For some minutes after the driver had disappeared, he stood trying to puzzle it out. Riker's incentive was patent—he wished to foil some plan of a man he hated on account of the lady whom, though "ornery," he still loved. At the same time, he wished to take no chances with that twenty-five.

But if Currie foresaw the necessity of a sudden disappearance, why go by the coach, instead of on horseback? And why did he linger for trouble? His attempt to sell the mountain farm away from

the Metcalfs, his rage at being tricked for their benefit, his attack on Parker's life, his overtures toward the dry faction, his attempted intimidation of Vernaluska that day at the clay-bank—all these facts borrowed significance from Tobe Riker's tip.

The only sure conclusion was that Currie had reason to stay in the region until after the Metcalf downfall. He seemed, more than hitherto, "a party" to be watched.

Meanwhile, a reunion of two had taken place inside the store, where Rex Currie was "tending" in the temporary absence of his friend, the Yankee proprietor. After a first glance of elaborate surprise, the hillbilly leaned over the counter to extend a welcome hand. This, Spencer Pope seized in a warm grasp.

"Glad to see you, Spence," said Currie. "Hoped my answer to your letter would bring you."

"It hurried my arrival. So Parker really isn't drinking, after all my trouble to locate him in the land where the corn-juice flows? I suppose his reform is to please this mountain girl I hear he's fascinated with?"

Pope watched the hillbilly's face while putting the question. He was rewarded.

Currie's jaw set, his face flushed.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"A whole lot, Rex. You're interested in this girl yourself; I'm interested in another—a case of girl all around. Parker has been boasting about his reform and I want to trip him up. Understand me? If you'll get him drunk at the fair this afternoon, I'll make it well worth your while."

Currie's smile of slow comprehension broadened into a grin. "I thought you claimed to be a friend of his?"

"He thinks I do, too. I was, until he got in my way. All's fair in love—you know that. What I ask is that you start him drinking."

"Start him drinking? You, if any one, ought to know, Spence, that North Carolina is dry as—as the morning after."

Pope drew down one eyelid. "And the cure for the morning after used to be some of the hair of the dog that did the biting, didn't it?"

"But it won't help my game to set him off." Currie scowled. "That would go to prove he ain't no revenuer, after all, and likely get him back into favor where I've just got him out."

The "best friend" laughed. "You needn't have any fear on that score. The smash-up mentioned in your letter can come as quickly as you like after this show-up, which, between ourselves, is the sole object of my visit. A revenuer might be drinking to *get* evidence, mightn't he?"

"But Parker wouldn't take a drink from me—we hate each other like snakes!"

"Why not get him through this young Metcalf then, whom he's so anxious to make up with on account of the girl?"

At this adroit suggestion, Currie flared. "So-ho, he's aiming to set up to Sandy?"

"He sure is. Asked my aid to convince the brother that he had no designs on the family still. Come, Rex, you've nothing to lose by doing this, and a whole lot to gain if Miss Metcalf is as good-looking as she's said to be. Besides, Cal Parker

running on high is a spectacle that is its own reward. Here, stick this in your pocket and go to it!"

Pope handed over a bank note of generous size. After a brief pause at the post-card rack for a random selection of souvenirs, he sauntered out of the store. To his further gratification, he found Parker on the steps outside, apparently absorbed in meditation and quite unsuspecting of the low-voiced indoor exchange.

Currie, starting some minutes later in the general direction of the pasture-lot, which held the scattered booths, refreshment tents, and rough-board barbecue tables of the "fair," received a disappointing report, as well as some startling information, from a tool of his own. He had fallen into the shambling step of Abide-with-me Shortoff, who, as it chanced, had been dismissed by the liege-lady of the family purse while she visited the "Emporium" to price petticoating.

"How you coming on, Bide, with that scheme of ours?"

Dismally sagged the hen-pecked chin, droned the voice. "How can I be coming along with it when Old Tom's bumbling still ain't where you said it'd be?"

"Ain't where I said?" demanded Currie. "If it ain't there, where is it?"

"I dunno! Tom must a-moved along. Likely he's livened up by now and will be extra careless with the lead. 'Twa'n't no use, nohow, offering to guide the slick to it if I'd lost track of where it was. This here State has done come to be a right oncertain place, if you'd ask me."

"And going to be more uncertain for some folks," the bootlegger glowered, "once we find where that hell-fox has moved to. You come along with me, Bide. Reckon I can find a drop or two to wet your whistle before Sally catches up with you. I'd worked it out that for you to lead along Parker was a neat way of doing for him with both dries and wets, leaving me out of it. Now we'll be obliged to hold back until we find that still!"

In Aunt Hootie's best room, the havoc of road travel had been somewhat effaced from the faces of the fair guests. In so far as concerns Sylvia's parent, the process had consisted of a smudging on and wiping off of safe-and-sane sanitary creams. The girl had pinned back the cloud of hair whose ash-gray was the glory of youth, rather than, as in her mother's case, the doom of middle age. She had dipped her face fearlessly into the water of the hand wash-basin.

"He looks as if he really had quit—Cal," she observed. "I hope—oh, I *hope* he has!"

Mrs. Brainard noted the access of sentiment disapprovingly.

"Maybe he has while here, childie. It seems strange that Spencer should have selected this particular place for him, doesn't it, when he must have known there was whisky in the mountains? I thought the whole idea was based on the fact that North Carolina is dry. Cal Parker's real test will come when he gets back to the convivial temptations of New York. I've a notion to ask him to return with us and have it over."

"Let's do it, momsy! I feel sure he's quite reconstructed."

"What I don't see, dear, is why you consider a reconstructed man when you could take your choice of so many strong since birth."

The lightish color of the matron's eyes deepened as she contemplated her lovely offspring, even as the line of the lips she had just rouged thickened with determination.

"You're not going to marry a mistake, Sylvia—not if I can help it. The best man alive is none too good for my darling, and all the Parker money would never make up to your mother for Cal as he was."

"I don't want Cal as he was." Sylvia made a shy, delightful moué. "But he looks so different and he is *so* attractive. I'm sure he's going to fulfill all my hopes of him. You want your darling to marry the man she likes the best, don't you?"

Mrs. Brainard was quick to acknowledge this wish as her very own.

"I've been thinking," continued the daughter, "that a reconstructed man just might be safer than one, as you put it, strong since birth. Spencer, for instance, is so strong that sometimes I—I hate him. And I don't think it's honorable of him to have been making love to me all along, right under Cal's nose."

"You shouldn't blame him for that, when he adores you."

"I know—as a master flier adores the machine under his control. I wonder whether an airplane doesn't ever want to fly the other way, to go up when the steering hand says down?"

With unwonted spirit, the girl crossed to where her mother was resting on the bed.

"It's against *your* convictions for me to marry Cal Parker. Yet when I think of marrying Spencer, my chief conviction is that the domination of the bird-man would arouse in the little human bird a will of her own. All I can say is, he'd start a whole lot of trouble for himself. However, keep that fair mind of yours open; we'll watch Cal and see."

They settled it that way. They would watch Cal; would see.

CHAPTER XXVII

KNOCK-OUT CHAMPION

BEFORE a pair of tents near the entrance to "Carnival Pasture," Cotton Eye Lee was beseeching all wayfarers to step up and regale themselves on soft drink and sandwiches at a price per "regale" which he quoted temptingly. But Rex Currie and the slab-sided son of gloom who accompanied him did not pay the black the courtesy of a moment's hesitation. They strode under a canvas flap into the rear tent, where they found Sandyred Metcalf, proprietor. After certain assurances had been made by the hill-billy, Bide Shortoff got his drink and was sent his way to find Sally—lest Sally find him.

Currie then broached the subject which had brought him to the tent. He laid before the young impressionable the arguments which, in view of Old Tom's drastic dismissal of himself a few nights before, he had felt would be necessary and had prepared.

Why couldn't they, who had been friends so many years, remain friends, no matter what the "old man" thought? If Sandy knew what was good for him and safe for the family, he would find out who were for them and who against. For instance, there was that foreigner who was setting up to Vernaluska—he, Rex had cooled down somewhat since the other night, but was Sandy going to take a chance

unless he knew whether or not the fellow was a revenuer?

Why not put the dude in puttees to the acid test of daring him to take a drink? If he up and swallowed like a man, they both would be satisfied, Rex would apologize, and all would be well. If he wouldn't drink there was still time to get right busy. Rex would place the stuff handy just inside. All he wanted, Heaven knew, was that the truth be brought out for the sake of the girl who had been denied him, but whose welfare he always would have at heart. That Sandyred was open to conviction, he proved by finally being convinced. He did not intend to fall short in his relationship to Verney.

The properties of the test were ready when, a few moments later, Parker, at Pope's suggestion, turned into the pasture lot for a preview of the scene of festivities.

The youngest of the Metcalfs, his mood of the morning rather emphasized than otherwise, returned the Northerner's greeting outside his refreshment booth and showed no disinclination toward the introduction to Pope.

"Be you the Spencer Pope that's deputy to the gover'ment?" drawled the young outlaw, with bravado.

"Yes, he is," Parker answered, "and I've intended he should meet you in a semi-official capacity. He is going to oblige me with a statement regarding myself. Will you tell Metcalf, Spence, exactly who and what I am?"

Pope obliged, according to his part of continuing to appear "best friend." "Calvin Parker is an artist by profession and in no way connected with the

revenue service. He came to North Carolina at my suggestion because I knew the State to be dry. His sole object was to get control of his thirst."

"So we-all have hearn tell." There was a jibe in Sandy's agreement.

"I give you my word, Metcalf, that the name of Parker has never been on our pay-rolls. The records will show it."

"Them records—they ain't here, are they? As for words, why shoot any more at us-all? Mr. Parker is right free with them himself." Sandy waved a calming hand. "For sure, it don't concern me none whether he's looking for bootleggers up yon in the hills or not, we-all being plain farmers, grubbing for enough to do on. But here it is, just on general principles—he is an officer or he ain't. Something more than words would be needed to hit the bull's-eye."

"What, for instance?" asked Parker. "Pope, here, and Mrs. Brainard, who came with him will both vouch that the letter which read so strangely to you up on the Fork was a strictly personal matter."

Sandyred's credulity seemed to be growing less and less. "Another passel of words—written words. Now looky here, out-Norther; I'm reasonable, and there's been things occurred since the other night that point my grudge away from you. You say you're a hard-hitter that's come down here to cure your thirst. Suppose——"

He paused and turned. At the moment the entrance to the tent had become occupied. Pope gripped Parker's arm.

"Isn't that the Rex Currie we were speaking of

at lunch?" His voice was a low aside, his manner that of half-recognition after years.

"Spencer Pope, by grace!" The bootlegger strode forward.

"Delighted and surprised, Currie! Have you met my friend Parker?"

In view of the issue, the artist thought best temporarily to retire his standing quarrel with the new entrant. Standing off and prepared for "tricks," he acknowledged acquaintance with a nod.

"Sure we've met, and there ain't no love lost between us, but if he's a friend of yours, Pope, that's different," said Currie with a large manner.

"Did you hear what we-all were chinning over?" Sandy cut in. "I've just been thinking, now, that it might back up Parker's argument if he'd take a swallow or two of good liquor with us-all. If he's a revenuer, he won't drink; if he ain't, he likely will. I've got a few bumblings stowed inside for a little cheer-you-up between festivities. If this strikes you as more fair than foul, Parker, step inside. I'll pass a free wetness."

Currie sent a suspicious look toward the visiting deputy.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of me, Rex," that official reassured him. "I'm on vacation to-day."

Still addressing Parker directly, young Metcalf further urged: "You made a fine-sounding proposition the other night of becoming our *particeps criminis*. This here's a short-cut to the same end. Leave us hear you clink to it before your friend."

All eyes turned upon the artist. Pope proclaimed his approval with a shoulder slap and the sugges-

tion that if he really wished to be convincing an agreeable means offered.

The suspect seemed to have made up his mind. Without any of the words which young Metcalf depreciated, he preceded the three men into the back tent. It was Rex Currie who, while Sandyred was letting down the flap to shut off the small ceremony from public view, assorted the flasks found, ready filled, upon the table. The liquid within three was colorless—the pure corn whisky of regional dispute. Only one of the quartette noted with satisfaction that Parker's had an amber cast, knew that its alive look was given by mixture with buckeye juice, that well-known, knock-out champion.

Parker's mind was distracted by regret over the form of this means to an end upon which he had determined. Before uncorking his flask, he unpinned and slipped into his waist-coat pocket a small amethyst brooch which had adorned his cravat.

"To Mr. Particeps Criminis!"

Sandyred named the toast. All lifted their individual containers and tossed off in good form. Realizing that he was under inspection, Parker drank deep, then shuddered as the fiery draft lapped downward. There was a peculiar taste to it—one that he had not noticed in the brush whisky he had drunk before.

Strangely enough, he felt cheered mentally by his physical distaste. It gave the test which the young mountaineer had proposed a grateful side-issue in proving that his newly stimulated ideals had conquered his gluttony. There was no attraction in the bottle itself—that he realized with unspeakable relief. Even while sniffing its fumes he knew

that he never would return to liquor. Whether Verne cared or whether she did not, he had come to care too much for his own self-respect to outrage it.

"A revenue slick might take one swiggle and not prove anything," he heard Currie offer, then the toast which, from him, was a reinforced challenge: "Here's to what we want and are going to have!"

A few swallows more or less did not matter to Parker, since he had found that they must be forced. The toast was one he could honor with a will. His eyes flared back into the hillbilly's, while the four flasks were again upraised. He knew that Currie was pledging the same hope as he—the hope of Verne.

"I'll be off, Cal, and stop here for you on my way back. I'm late now. Guess you can win this liquid debate as to your identity without any further help from me."

Parker nodded toward the man he believed his friend who was stooping to exit under the tent-flap. He was preoccupied with a question born of the exultation surging through him. What was it the gas-man had said when sent for to fix the logs in his studio fire-place last winter? The best results came from a blue flame, not red. He must not turn the gas on full force; he must regulate it. Real heat, good cheer, great power came, then, through control. He had found control of the red flames that were wasting him. His love for Verne—that was a blue flame burning steadily, cheerily, heart-warmingly within him. The true love of Verne was what he wanted—what, please God, he was going to have.

Automatically he made replies to the waxing joviality of Currie and young Metcalf. A third, a fourth—even a fifth of the toasts proposed he afterward remembered responding to in good part.

His attention was once recalled by a jocular question of Currie's anent the new location of the still. Anxiety held him lest Sandyred should be won sufficiently by Currie's protests of friendship to reveal the new hiding-place, but held him only momentarily. His own thoughts were more absorbing.

Odd that he should be making this application about blue flames when they were the subject upon which Tom Metcalf was considered to be obsessed! The old fox was not half as mad as he wished to appear—Parker had thought that ever since he had been held prisoner in the jarred window frame of the shack upon the ledge. Wasn't the justification of this instinctive theory part of the reason he had bought the mountain? . . . Clear, strong flames were all about—mountain daylight—a man's self-respect—his heart's deep love for Verne. . . . Strange place to imprison them, in a lard-pail behind the chimney of a mountain shack! One should be careful running them through the fingers not to lose them—the blue flames of self-control and love and loyalty. . . . That pail—he ought to find it. He ought to make sure the lid was tight.

Yet it didn't belong to him. Probably old Tom had removed it immediately after his, Cal's, discovery. . . . Even if it still were there, a Parker would not dig up another man's secret, like an ordinary pry or a night thief. He had flames of his own to attend, lest his soul be seared to ash by the fires of fawn-green eyes and copper hair. . . .

They had burned away the dross of his one-time appetite. . . . His heart was now ablaze, but with the controlled flames of the gas logs at home, steady, intense—and *blue!*

CHAPTER XXVIII

ANTIC COLT

PARKER's awakening was accompanied by a series of discoveries, the initial one being that he still lived. The second was the heat, stifling to suffocation, perhaps from the fact that the roof lowered close over him.

Through a paneless window could be seen a hillside whose occasional bare patches showed soil of fervid color. Above, the sky was covered with thin clouds, like asbestos, that hung quite still and radiated the heat of the quarter-high sun behind.

It seemed to be the first really torrid day of the summer.

He realized that he was in great physical discomfort, his limbs cramped, his body oozing sweat. Although he yearned to go to sleep again, his brain forbade. Even while the thumping within his temples accented a conviction that he would have been more comfortable dead, curiosity as to the cause of his unhappy state urged him.

In trying to move, to sit up, he found that he was tied hand and foot. Collapsing again upon his springy resting-place, he tried to think. Why was he lying on a hay-loft, close under cobwebby rafters and tied with ropes? He was Cal Parker—of that he felt sure. The circumstance was most unusual. But never mind. It did not matter particularly at

the moment. The chief thing was to forget his misery, to go back to sleep.

The second time he roused, it seemed hotter, must have been a good deal later. There were things he should be doing, he remembered with a start. There was that lard pail of flames—blue flames—which he ought to find. And the Metcalf still—Currie must not be allowed to worm its new location out of Sandyred. Currie planned— Just what was it the bootlegger planned? Tobe Riker had told him. It was something that struck a chord of vibrant uneasiness in his mind.

He jerked himself into a sitting posture and began to investigate his state of bondage. The knots in the rope proved to be of the "slip" variety and yielded to his nervous manipulation. Shortly, he found himself free. His hand brushed against something hard and cool which, on examination, showed to be a flask two-thirds full of amber-colored whisky. Empty flasks were weighting both side pockets of his coat. They started him remembering other things.

Why had Currie assorted the liquor for the young blockader's dare? Why was his amber, rather than the innocuous-looking white of pure corn whisky? That peculiar, bitter taste to it—why hadn't he recognized it in time? Of course the stuff had been doped, else those few drinks never would have knocked him out. Why had they doped it?

A sense of loss caught him as his hand lifted to his cravat. His pin, the small amethyst brooch which Verne had hoped would protect him from just such temptation, what had become of it? Oh, yes, he knew now. He had been unable to take

that first drink until he removed it. Hurriedly he searched through his pockets and drew a deep inhalation of relief when he found it. Carefully he refastened it in the brocade folds of his scarf. He would never trust himself with it off again.

In his descent of the ladder that led to the ground-floor of the barn in which he found himself, Parker was steadied by a rage, primarily against himself and growingly against those who so successfully had accomplished his downfall. He had been gullible—made a fool by his desire to convince the brother of Verne. But there should be—there *would* be a penalty for the crime of drugging his drinks! Rung by rung, each a stand of justification for the resentment which was conquering his exquisite physical misery, he descended.

Like the “good-morning” of some tolerant roommate, a familiar whinny from a near-by stall greeted him. Teetotaler here? In whose barn was he, then, sequestered?

From the door, he looked out over the kitchen garden that distinguished the Hotel Plott. So—his horse had been untied from the hitching-rack and stabled suggestively with him. To judge by the sun, it must be about lunch-time. Probably Sylvia and her mother were inside the house. Probably they had a very poor opinion of him. But that didn't matter much; in fact, it might help in the difficult favor he had intended to ask of Sylvia last night and would make occasion to ask now.

Sandy—— But he was Verne's brother. Currie he would reckon with first. Perhaps some excuse would show up for Sandyred.

He turned back to his horse.

"Tee," he remarked, "you see me for the first time mad—fighting mad."

The piebald looked him over—but with his blind eye.

As rapidly as possible, Parker saddled, then rode toward the kitchen door. A pan of dishwater, soused to the ground, heralded the appearance of Mrs. Plott.

"You have come to?" she inquired superfluously. "Spencer Pope said to leave you where you were, that the haymow was as good a resting place as any. 'Light and come in. I'll warm over the coffee for you."

At her suggestion, Parker realized anew his condition.

"Thank you, but I don't feel like breakfast."

"I reckon you don't." The hoot was all out of her voice. It trailed dismally as she added: "'T wouldn't have been my way to put the wets off guard—it wasn't exactly what we hoped from you."

"Was I," he asked, "pretty bad?"

"*Bad?*" She cheered visibly under remembered horrors. "Friend Parker, you'll never be forgot hereabouts. You was what the natives call an 'antic colt.' Nobody sees as how you *could* be an officer now, what with your right hand aiding your left in dashing out the jewel of consistency."

"Nor I, Mrs. Plott. Now, what I want worse than my breakfast is a talk with my friends."

"Your friends?"—blankly.

"Yes. Spencer and the Brainards. Are they in?"

Another rush of words delayed the truth. "Oh, you poor, misused boy! To think that she would

leave them drag her away from you—and she your affianced bride! Land knows, I did my best with Mrs. Brainard to explain that a strong spiritual purpose lurked behind your weakness of the flesh. But I couldn't sway their purpose, although Miss Brainard cried her pretty eyes most out when I told her how disappointed you'd be when you came to over her desertion."

"You mean that they——" It was Parker's turn to look blank.

"Have gone, bag and baggage. I could cry, too, every time I recollect the look of that sweet Miss Sylvia. When I asked her just at the last, should I give you any message, 'Tell him, good-by,' says she. Then she shivered, hot as it was already, and covered her little white face with her veil. Spencer promised to send down two officers to your aid without delay. By the time they arrive, you'll likely be all ready to lead the raid, although why you felt called upon to—well, to do what you did——"

She stopped in her consolatory outpouring for want of an object. The tail of the horse was swishing around the corner of the house. Automatically, he had lifted his hat, his face twisting into a stiff imitation of the Cal Parker smile that belonged with the act.

In truth, he was reduced to automatism by the blow. They had gone and he had not made that statement, dictated by past Parkers, to Sylvia! Why had she cried on leaving if not because she still cared enough for him to feel personal shame in his disgrace? The fact that she had cried, she whose life had all been laughter, hurt and obligated him.

He must follow them to New York and settle the questions once and for all. He must not yield to the temptation of speaking first to Verne. He could not afford to have the jeers of the fossils hurled at him for the rest of his life because he had slumped from the high standard set by them. He had endured their stinging rebukes so long over his intemperance, he did not intend to furnish them with another cause of complaint.

And yet—— He frowned at the mental addendum. He could not leave the Blue Ridge just now, even briefly. There was Currie to be dealt with and advisedly. There was the arrival of those promised officers to be anticipated. After the last bumbings were disposed of and Verne and her people were safe—then it would be time enough to follow Sylvia and ask release.

Evidently Teetotaler missed his rider's wonted bridle control, for several times he shifted course through trying to discover by backward glances the cause of the laxity. By the time the master had come to a decision on his personal difficulties, the mount had made his way inside the fair grounds and stood waiting to be hitched.

Parker accommodated him. His interest aroused by the crowd around Sandyred's refreshment booth, he strode that way. The text of a sort of chant raised in the African tones of Cotton Eye Lee reached his ears.

"Step right up, ladies and genulmen. Buy a sandwich and see the only antic colt in captivity. The greatest show on earth, begun at the dance last night, is being circumscribed within the walls of this here tent. Land sakes alive, fellow citizens, are

you-all going to hang back when the show costs nothing extraditional? This here's a real, gov'ment-broke colt, anticking around with the blood of——"

He stopped, but not from shortage of wind or enthusiasm in his delirium of words. For a moment he returned his variegated stare into that of the man offering him a dime. Unintelligibly he mumbled, while lifting a hand to tweak his own ebony ear, as if to make sure that he was awake and not seeing a "ghost." Recovering, he took the coin, handed over a sandwich and resumed his barking with what sang-froid he could assume.

Although Parker pulled his hat well over his eyes, his garb was too distinctive for others not to recognize him. The soft pedal was put upon the crescendo of laughter around him and his way was made easy to a vantage-view through the tent entrance.

Within, an orchestra-stand had been improvised of an overturned box and a keg. Upon the latter squatted Abide-with-me Shortoff, engaged in "beating straws"—a local device for aiding the fiddler in marking time, wherein a stout broom-straw is whanged upon a string of the violin. On the box sat the musician, his heels seconding the work of his hands by timely and effective kicks against the sides, as the tune merged from "Sourdough Mountain" to a jerky conception of "Old Black Joe." The fact that this wielder of the bow was Rex Currie proved to be Parker's one gratifying observation.

His gaze settled upon the artist being advertised afresh by the word-obsessed barker as a "reg'lar stem-twister of mimicry—the plumb liveliest colt what ever took off the antics of a foreigner from

New York town." His physical sufferings gave way to mental ones as he watched.

His wildest impulse—that primal one of self-protection—was to rush the tent and with the brute force of his rage put a stop to this amusement of the public at his expense; his tamest was to slink away and spare himself the humiliating spectacle. He mastered both. Sternly put was the reminder that no fair-minded man refuses to see himself as others see him.

Through the performance he came to appreciate why Sylvia could contribute only tears to the tragedy of his "reform." Long before the end of the act he had the knowledge, not the mere hope, that he would never again risk a first drink, no matter how excused by its "object." The self-respect exhorted by his dear defense before her court of hills henceforth should be held above all else.

His subconsciousness roused to a recognition of himself when drunk beyond the mercy of a doubt. "*Mea culpa, mea culpa!*" pled the conscious mind which, for the first time, really understood. The forehead of his pride beat the dust.

In pantomime, that language which the least-lettered can understand, Sandyred Metcalf, the inimitable, revived the scene of the out-Norther's yesterday. He greeted his city guests with drink-effusive gallantry and undertook to escort them through the ways and byways of the carnival. With a flask in either pocket and frequent stops to accept the invitation of their open mouths, he conducted early events with the exaggerated importance of the inebriate. Imaginary acquaintances along the way he greeted and recommended by introduction to his

friends. A mythical flight of stairs he undertook, only to stumble and sprawl on the ground.

Rising, he reproached the two bottles with winks and varied facial contortions, denoting that his sense of humor had not been jostled in the fall. He addressed a street audience on prohibition, with significant if somewhat uncertain gestures toward reward in the ether above and doom in the earth below. As a quip to the supposedly riotous applause over this farce, he passed his two flasks before beginning the bows of acknowledgment which eventually disturbed his equilibrium to the extent of another sprawl.

He came to evening and the dance. Evidently he had passed from the early, weakling stages of a Cal Parker spree into that condition of strength and initiative which would carry him through hours of activity, for not one minute of which he could account after he had slept off the effects. Wound up now by the grip of the drug into a thing of extravagant impulse and machinelike prowess, he improvised a dance that combined Oriental suggestiveness with a down-South clog.

Sipping anon from the pocket fonts, his good-humor became drowned in an oncoming wave of irascibility. Presumably challenged by some swain, he forsook "art" for a brawl and battled drunkenly until, overcome by superior numbers, he was thrown and roped.

There he lay, spitting the dust, blubbering in vain appeal for some one to convoy the bottle within his captive hand to his lips. His tongue lolled, his eyelids grew heavy over rolling eyeballs. It became evident, as licensed by the speed of the "act," that;

sans fuel, the fires within him were burning down to the ash of exhaustion. Soon, with features unpleasantly snarled, he slept.

The performance thrown in with a sandwich was over; most of the spectators, rousing above the restraining presence of the man in the doorway, uproariously applauded the young genius who had impersonated him.

A few glanced around hopefully to see how the original antic colt was going to take it.

CHAPTER XXIX

COME TO GRIPS

BUT Parker did not reward the curious. He betook himself from the scene as unobtrusively as he had come.

The small gratification drawn from the presence of Currie in Sandyred's side-show was due to an obvious deduction. Since the hillbilly was there he could not be "projecting" elsewhere for the removed still and the girl over whose possession he seemed to have some definite scheme. It was enough that his presence in Dismal gave Parker time to clear his head and body from the poison he had drunk, before demanding the payment it was now his turn to collect.

With evening, from Fallaway Rim, he lifted devout eyes to the juror hills and, his right hand upraised, again took the oath:

"Oh, nature's jury, hear one more mortal plea! If again I blunder in my testimony, may you fall upon me with your might, may you crush me with your weight of ages, forever and ever. Amen."

The peace of their absolute justice came over him and soothed him into heavy sleep. The first tiptoe of dawn did not surprise him. Already he was awake, his mind settled over what first to do. The most direct course to aid the Metcalfs seemed to be in a renewal of his effort at an alliance with them.

In view of his spectacular acceptance of young Sandy's challenge, he had new argument to advance. He would insist himself into "terms" with the household. That it was the third time ought to help. He would offer anew to lend them manpower in the disposal of that last "batch." Working with them, he could watch over Verne—could warn them with personal force against trusting Rex Currie, should the impressionable Sandyred try to reinstate his hillbilly friend in the good graces of the old man. Speed in getting the lawbreakers beyond danger of arrest should be his first concern. Afterward, he would demand recompense, with compound interest, for the personal indignities he had suffered.

The hour that found him in the saddle was one which often had served as an end to days of his past—never as a beginning. Riding at a good pace along the road to the Metcalf place, he felt significance in the fact that Summer, in mature beauty, had redeemed the profuse suggestion of Spring.

He was nearing trail's-end in the out-curving turn of the main road, where the mountain girl had surprised him that day of the presentation of the jug, when the sound of hoof-beats on either side caused him to dismount and draw his horse into concealment.

The first sight from his cover brought temptation. It was of Verne, riding her mule, her expression fresher, more vigorous than the early morn. He wanted desperately to hurry forward in greeting after the long deprivation, to ask her about the return of his note unread—perhaps to let her guess from his face, although she was not yet to hear, the

hammering of his heart at the sudden, vivid, desirable sight of her.

His second glance in the other direction brought restraint. A horseman had been about to round the curve, but now turned into the woods, evidently to let her pass, himself unseen.

So it came about that a small procession of three riders was formed and headed, through devious ways and byways, toward that mountain known as Grumbly Bald. On account of the exact distances maintained, the last of them had the advantage of knowledge.

Because Rex Currie saw fit thus surreptitiously to trail the girl of his choice, the out-Norther saw fit to follow both. Half an hour later, a fourth rider found cause for uneasiness in the manifold hoof-prints, as he followed closely the path of the three.

Vernaluska Metcalf had started ahead of her men-folk because of her anxiety to delay not an hour longer than necessary the completion of their last illicit distillation. The sooner it was attended the better. Then, too, the new site of the still made unconventional hours the safest.

Sandyred had returned from the carnival somewhat after midnight in such high spirits that he had awakened the family to tell of the alleged slick's fall from responsibility, his own side-show of the antic colt, and the substantial sum accrued from the merchandising of his talent. Although realizing that the boy would wish to lie late abed, she had prepared his breakfast with her own and finally succeeded in arousing him to her need of his help

at the still. After the bead had been drawn, she promised, he might sleep away the rest of the day.

Her father's caprice had ruled in the selection of the new danger-spot—a move made advisable by his open break with Currie and pointed by the rational note from one so strangely persistent in trying to blind them if, indeed, he was their foe. Early on the morning following the receipt of Parker's warning, the natural cave beneath the girl's pottery storehouse had been stripped of all distilling apparatus, and the hole in the rocks, which had carried the smoke of so many illicit fires up through the chimney of her oven, had been filled with clay. With Vernaluska scouting the road ahead and Sandy riding guard behind, Old Tom had accomplished removal to the hastily built structure that was waiting on the Grumbly Bald property, to be his when the additional payments had been made.

After finding a sheltered place for Solomon and tying him to a tree, the girl removed her shoes and stockings and made her way up the bed of the stream which left no tracks for prying eyes. Just before reaching the windowless shack on the ledge she turned into the rhododendron thicket along the opposite side, which had been selected as the likeliest hiding-place.

A hee-haw from Solomon caused her to pause and strain her ears for sounds foreign to the purl of the brook or the whispering of trees. Hearing nothing, she reassured herself that the mule's salute was no respecter of persons and that the disturber, if human, was doubtless her sleepy-head brother. She proceeded to the task which she had

taken upon herself to allow the old man a rest.

The still-house itself was a mere enclosure of freshly cut logs, roofed with bark. It held the still—a vessel with a closed head, connected with a spiral tube called a “worm” and surrounded by a jacket through which cold water was constantly piped; also the furnace, roughly constructed of boulders.

The purpose of the “house” was more to conceal the glare when a wood fire was burning than for the protection of the blockaders from the weather. Further back lay the “lair,” a thatch of browse, where the operators rested when there was nothing to do except wait upon the “cooking.”

Several precautions against discovery had been taken by the outlaw patriarch, alive to all the wiles of his kind. Two great hemlock-trees had been felled in such a way that their tops served to aid the brush in the masking, a service which they would perform as long as their tops remained green.

Around the whole was a dead-line of peculiar Blue Ridge construction—a veritable *cheveaux de frise*, although to the Metcalfs known as the “stop-’em-short”—contrived of laurel cut into spikes, entangled, with the points slanting outward, in brush bound together by cables of wild grape and vining shrubs.

In the making of this batch, sworn to be Old Tom’s last, the corn had been sprouted by a warm-water, percolating process, ground into sweet meal at their own tub-mill, turned into “beer” after due fermentation, and sent through the still, to come out as “singlings.” This was now being redistilled, or “doubled,” into marketable liquor.

The fact that the doubling process required more skill than any of the several connected with the making of blockade accounted for the girl's anxiety. Too much distillation would result in pure alcohol, while too little meant rank liquor that would lack the strength necessary to quench regional thirsts. Always had Old Tom Metcalf scorned to resort to a "thumping-chest," by which singlings may be made drinkable. He despised that trick of his illicit trade as much as he did the sort of liquor thus produced. With a small vial as instrument, the "bead" must now be taken at intervals—the test depending on the iridescent bubbles that would rise when the vial was tilted.

Vernaluska felt quite equal to the delicate task, but needed some one to feed the furnace; therefore her awakening of last night's celebrant. The Metcalf store of "bumblings" had been quite exhausted in the draft upon it caused by the general cessation of the industry after enforcement of the new State laws. Knowing the contracts which the old man had undertaken to fill and the iron of his determination, she realized that his illegal career would not cease until the present distillation was run off to his fancy.

She set to work. Although it was said of her redoubtable parent that he could make the best bush whisky in all the Carolinas with his eyes shut, her double task of taking the bead and feeding the furnace would give her plenty to do. She had stooped to tuck the ends of a bundle of dry saplings over the coals in the fire-box, when the sound of voices not far away caused her to return them to the floor and straighten into a tense, listening attitude.

"What new cuss work are you up to, Currie?"

"A brand that's going to get cussed if you don't stop in your tracks and have it out with me."

She heard the two sentences complete in two voices she knew. Her heart hammering uncomfortably, she stole on soundless bare feet out of the still-house and began wriggling through the brush toward the branch, whence had sounded the demand and retort. Her anxiety lest the still had been discovered was assuaged on seeing that those who had been following her, whether knowingly or on affairs of their own, had passed the rhododendron copse without suspicion and climbed the stream to the ledge on which stood the deserted Currie shack. Well under cover, she picked her way to a point from which she could both see and hear.

CHAPTER XXX

DRILLED

VERNALUSKA's handsome suitor had turned to face Calvin Parker, standing with dripping puttees at the streamside. The Northerner was breathing hard, his cap stuffed into a pocket of his Norfolk, his black hair disordered by the wind. His right hand was guarding his hip; his left carried a heavily leaved, forked branch which evidently he had used as a cane in the climb. He looked angry—more forceful than the girl ever had seen him.

"Why are you following me—don't you realize yet I've got it in for you?" The sneering demand came from Currie.

"And hasn't it occurred to you yet that *I've* got it in for *you*? I'd advise you to about-face and make yourself scarce!"

"Gad a'mighty, you've got a nerve! Me make myself scarce at your say-so?"

"My say-so is good on this property. I hold a mortgage that's going to prevent you bothering others on it. Get off hopping quick or I may ask you to pay what you owe me."

"Owe you? I don't owe you anything, except——"

"Oh, yes, you do—a wring of your neck for every pellet of shot in that man-trap you set and every drop

of dope you put into my drinks at the Dismal Gap Fair."

Currie, his eye on the Northerner's right, guff-awed his derision. "Me pay—to a goop what don't nose-whiff his demijack before he swiggles it! Besides, I gave you fair warning—told you to look out for me, didn't I? You didn't come up here trailing me so much as—well, somebody that don't favor the fooldest revenue slick that ever fell for bumbings and buckeye."

"So you admit the buckeye?"

"I'm admitting nothing except that you'd best kit-caboodle it out of here yourself, Mr. Calvin A. Parker, of New York, before I get you packed. I'll give you two minutes to——"

"You'll give me—all the time I want—or else I've made—a wash-foot Baptist of myself for—for nothing."

Parker's rasped remarks, his forward spring, just as the hillbilly, with a lightning movement, drew from his hip, the lashing sound of the improvised cane—all were incidents of the next second or so.

The watcher's stifled outcry went unheard in the report of a gun. She collapsed to her knees, weak from terror and almost instant relief, on seeing Currie's revolver flung by that forked branch, thick with leaves, into the stream. Parker was laughing into the face of the man he had confused and disarmed by his unexpected onslaught.

"Never shoot, myself, unless it's necessary, being no killer at heart. And I'm hard to hit, even for a real gunman. You ready to settle with me now? See, I'll give you an even chance!"

With which Parker tossed his own automatic after Currie's into the creek.

In the very second of this voluntary disarmament, Currie sprang at him, vociferating in fury: "You've gone and done it now, you varmint, taking my gun a second time. I came up here this morning for two things. You're one of them. You're going to pay——"

"Always glad to pay—my debts. Nobody has to dun me—twice."

In contrast with the mountaineer's fury, the Northerner sprang into the fray with cheer. As if from some previous incarnation, the fighting tactics in which the Parker of college days had excelled revived in this comparative wreck of later years. The vitality he had breathed in from the hills rushed to his aid. The moral punch of a just cause enthused him. Compound interest on the several attacks of the hillbilly bought up his long-maintained repression.

More than safe-guarding the still made the girl under cover of the brush linger in her part of audience. Now that their weapons were in the creek they had, indeed, an equal chance, she told herself.

Although Currie had great strength, the city man had shown before that he knew what he was about. He had said he was as good a man as Currie, whom she had come to dislike and fear of late. As a sort of justification for her many defenses of him, she hoped, with all the primordial savagery of her mountain-bred ancestresses, that he might prove, not merely as good, but the better man. After Sandy's lurid account of his weakness at the carnival,

she wished fiercely that he should now show strength.

Parker, thrown off by sheer man-weight, tightened his muscles for a new offensive. Currie lunged to meet it. Again they closed, the artist feathering into the bootlegger with tempered fury, aided by admirable foot-work. Currie, solid in his resistance as the mountain itself, showed inartistic but effective tendencies. In a second-long interval of recovery, he seized the New Yorker in a bearlike clutch, threw him heavily, battered his head upon the ground until there came a stain of blood.

"Now, maybe you'll trail up here after my doney-gal—maybe you'll snatch my gun!"

In the moment's respite, Vernaluska started forward to prevent further brutality, but paused, shaken between hope and fear. She saw Parker spring from his feint at exhaustion and go at the mountaineer as though the combat had only begun. With jabs and swings, systematic, well-directed, and so diverse as to confuse the man of muscle *sans* science, he invited and then fought off ponderous rushes. Dodging skilfully, his effort was plain—to wear down the other and becloud his judgment.

Evidently encouraged by the honor of first blood, now streaming from a cut over the artist's left eye, Currie continued his bull tactics and stood up well under punishment. Despite his natural tenacity, however, he in time found himself giving way—backing toward the far side of the ledge, where there was a sheer drop. That he had reached the limit of safety he was told from an unexpected source.

"The edge—have a care for the edge!"

Vernaluska's cry startled both, but the advantage

went to Parker, the quicker of mind. As his adversary lunged forward, he planted himself for a swing. Currie, in trying to slip under this and at the same time escape the menace of the edge, lost his footing and sprawled.

Full weight Parker dropped upon him and strove for a wrestling hold which would bring him to terms. Currie, in the violence of his attempts to squirm from under, seemed to lose his sense of direction. Before he recovered, he was going over the bank; in panic released his hold on his opponent for the flimsier one of rocks that gave way at his weight. With an upward glare at Parker safe on the bank, he started down and down.

Hurrying back toward the creek, with the idea of locating the source of that warning cry, Parker stopped to wash the cut over his eye and the blood from his face. Imagining that he had seen a flutter of alien green disappearing in the brush, he splashed down-stream eagerly.

"Hi—if you turn in there I'll drill you!"

This threat in a man's voice, brought Parker up short on the bank. For several seconds he stood rigid, wondering whether it really had come from below him, assorting each noise of brook and breeze. Concluding that his ears must have deceived him as to direction and that the unarmed hillbilly, having climbed back to the ledge, was attempting a ruse, he laughed tauntingly and started into the brush.

But something stinging hot stopped him. While falling, he realized several things. His ears had been right; the gun report *had* come from below. From out the bush, a woman's scream wavered, to

the sound of running feet; Sandyred Metcalf splashed up the branch, a smoking revolver in hand, a delirium of exultation twisting his face.

"So you're the damn spy everybody said, after all? Well, you can't say I didn't warn you—you've got none to blame but yourself!"

The fierce words scourged the ears of the fallen man. Verne's face lowered close to his.

"You, Sandy—you aimed to drill him?" he heard her ask.

"Did I *aim* to? Do you s'pect I was popping at a boomer?"

Her moan lifted over the lighter nature complaints. "Sandy, you've gone and killed him. He was meaning to be friendly, and now you're gone and killed him!"

For the life of him, Parker could not reassure her. He felt a rush of gratitude for the grief she was showing. Then he gave up to whatever it was soothing his sensibilities.

Vernaluska set herself to do what was possible, demanding the coöperation of her brother.

"I only aimed to nip him," that young hot-head about-faced. "He was heading straight for the still-house, wa'n't he? It's only what pap would have done. Shucks, sis, he ain't dead—I had no intention such. He can't be dead!"

The girl's lips, as well as her face, had turned to a pale saffron and worked stiffly.

"Give me your knife; I'll cut away his shirt. Go to the still-house and fetch a pail."

It was when she stood mid-stream, scooping up the clearest water, that she fancied she heard retreating steps in the bush of the opposite side.

"Rex—Rexey!" she called.

"For a moment she waited, shaking as if she were some tar-heel dame from the lowlands suddenly "ailing" with chills and fever.

Catching the contagion of her fear, Sandyred rushed to the stream-side. "Rex—hi, Rex, be that you?"

The only answer either of them got came later, after they had "toted" the deadweight of Parker to the mountain's base. This lay in the absence of Currie's horse.

"You make a dash for home, Sandy," was her decisive command. "Send along Tom with the buck-board. The sooner you go on the dodge the better. Rex is no friend of any of us—he's gone to squeal on you."

She stood staring in the direction her brother had disappeared until long after the hoof-beats of his horse were silenced by distance. Then she turned and knelt beside the silent Thing on the ground—the professed friend whom the bite of Sandy's gun had made so unresponsive. She lifted and smoothed back the black hair. With trembling finger-tips she pressed downward the white lids over eyes which looked too dark and brilliant. Her gaze settled, as if hoping, on the tight-pressed lips.

"Sending Sandy on the dodge don't mean that I'm going to give you up yet a while, not until I have to," she addressed him in a hovering murmur. "I've been too tarnal hard on you. I didn't know until to-day how hard and I hanker to tell you so. Don't you want to hear me tell you, Parkerman?"

She slipped her hand inside his slashed silk shirt to a place well below the small red splotch she had

found beneath his shoulder. She waited a moment, then forced a seductive smile.

"You-uns said I was strong to help you. You painted me as Spring. Are you going back on that now? Ain't you ever going to call me Verne again? Ain't you ever going to smile at me in your different way, like as if you were too tired, almost, to smile at all? I don't mind telling you its more than fear for Sandy makes me want you to rouse up. I'm Spring and I'm still here. Won't you come back, Cal?"

Her pseudo-smile faded from not being seen; her coaxing voice broke from going unheard—sobbed down into the wordless whisper of a wail. Then, as if terrorized by her own despair, she urged him anew:

"Come, come, won't you rouse up just long enough to hear me? I want you to hear me so—can't you rouse up for Verne?"

She pressed her hand gently upon his heart to warm it; leaned so close that her lips touched his and her breath did for two. It seemed to her, as she waited, that the trees stopped their whispers and the birds their chatter—that even the stream was breathing deep and rythmically with her.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BLUEST FLAME

THE "spare-room" bed of state, built of home-felled timber, boasted both headboard and footboard, as well as four hand-carved posts. Beside it, in a low rocking-chair, sat Vernaluska Metcalf, as she had sat the greater number of hours since Calvin Parker had been "toted in" the day before.

It was nearly noon and he still lay in the trance-like sleep which mercifully had claimed him before and since he had undergone Miss Emmy's ministrations. That good spinster, stoic from adopted motherhood's experience with splinter-lifting, bruise-healing and bone-setting, had found and extracted the bullet from his shoulder; had cleansed and skillfully bound the wound; had declared that her patient had "a chance."

The girl, almost prostrated with relief when the fluttering at his heart had answered her desperate recall, had been glad to let the older woman take charge of the case; but no nurse ever had followed orders more carefully than she. With clock-tick regularity the prescribed stimulant had been administered and the cold packs changed.

Now hope, strong in her heart, was expressed in the murmured tune she was picking from her duclimer. Soft almost as thought, the music seemed to soothe him, rather than disturb. The rested look

had deepened on his face, and he breathed easily. Soon she dropped the instrument into her lap and leaned forward to throw back the "company" coverlet. Beneath it, almost lost in the sea of white clothing, the artist's long body stretched quite still; his face looked white as the linen by contrast with his black hair. Fearing an increase in his temperature from the noon heat, she crossed to the window and pinned the centers of the blue-print side curtains over the dimity ones.

"What was the name of that piece?"

She turned, startled as though the weak voice had sounded from another world. Her heart stood still. The moment was almost too much to endure. Swiftly she recrossed to the bedside. The lids which she had touched so despairingly at the mountain base had lifted, his intense eyes looked sentiently into hers.

"Why—why," she stammered, "it is called 'Pull the Mule.'"

"Dedicated to Solomon, I suppose?"

Joy over his small attempt at levity limbered her tongue. "My mule don't need pulling," she flashed.

She sat down, leaned toward him. After all they had been through, he physically, she mentally, it seemed strange to be speaking commonplaces. Could it be possible, she wondered, that he did not realize who had shot him?

"I'm right glad," she said softly, "that you-all are better. You can never know how glad. But that's enough for now. You mustn't talk or even think, and you'd best mind me. I'll play a rocking song; you-uns just listen and maybe you'll fall off to sleep again."

"But I don't want to fall off again. A fellow asleep is at an awful disadvantage. I'm afraid I've missed a lot already. That banjo-harp-guitar effect you've been playing——"

He started to stretch his hand toward the dulcimer, but winced from the sudden pain of movement. When he spoke again:

"Sandy—where is he? I want to ask him why he did it."

He put the question with his eyes shut, so did not see the instant tension of her face at this proof that he did remember.

"Sandyred—oh, he's around, I reckon," she replied.

For a while he lay in silence. She slowed down the lullaby until it was scarcely audible, hoping he had been forced by weakness to take her suggestion of falling asleep.

His next words, however, showed that he had been thinking: "I fixed it up before your court of the hills; convinced even the judge. I want to know, does my counsel believe in me yet?"

The noise of a horse arriving in the yard diverted her answer. Startled, she arose, laid the dulcimer on the bed and, with her lithe, boyish swing of the open, hurried from the room. The door she closed behind her.

At the front step, her father was greeting Asa Simms. The transplanted Yankee noted the girl's appearance with but a nod, his manner excited.

"I've nearly winded a good horse riding ahead to warn you. That traitor, Currie, has tipped off the sheriff, and there's a posse headed this way—

Dry Dryden and a bunch of his ilk, along with Dr. Prosch."

"What for, do you reckon?" The old red lion of the Metcalf clan drew up bristling.

"What for? Well, only just to clap a pair of wrist-irons on Sandyred—that's all! Crime, murder. Victim, a revenue officer."

Old Tom reached for and began to examine the repeating rifle that had been leaning against the door jamb. "Irons on my Sandy—hell's banjer!"

"Lay off the gun, Tom." Vernaluska placed an urgent hand upon her parent's arm. "There's nothing to arrest Sandy for. If they're thinking to charge that he committed the—the accident, it won't hold. Parker's going to get well."

The postmaster looked surprised. "Glad to hear that for your sakes if not for the slick's. Rex reported him dead as a doornail. But this posse can grab the fellow that plugged him and hold him for assault with intent to kill. All they need is the revenueur's accusation, if it happens he knows who——"

The girl didn't wait to hear the old man's angry denial that his son had been anywhere in the vicinity at the time of the shooting. She made a brief visit to the room shared by father and son, after asking Miss Emmy to "do up a quick poke of grub." With her two parcels, she hurried to the barn, saddled Sandy's mount, and rode to the patch where she knew him to be hoeing corn. She did not consult or advise; rather, she commanded him.

"He's come to, Sandy—he knows who potted him. See to it you keep on the dodge until I give you leave to show. No Metcalf has ever worn wristlets, and it ain't fitten this generation should set the style."

Scarcely had she turned from the sight of his disappearance within the brush that led into the fastness of Grumbly Bald, every hollow and by-path of which he knew, when she heard the approach of what sounded a goodly cavalcade entering the clearing from the other side.

Unseen, she returned to the house through the cook-shack door and loitered out on the front stoop just as the posse, headed by "Gettum" Stannard, the wiry, black-browed sheriff, drew rein. A detachment composed of Dry Dryden and that conqueror of the deepest root and most fractious nerve, Dr. Hezekiah Plott, proceeded at a sign from their leader to the back yard, evidently to guard against escape.

"Well, Asa," drawled the county's small but redoubtable chief peace officer, "be you delivering the United States mail in person these days?"

Without awaiting a reply, he turned his celebrated official smile upon Old Tom. "We-all have come to invite your boy Sandy to a little visit down to the jail at the county-seat."

The patriarch's gaze veered from the reassuring, fawn-green eyes of his daughter to meet that of the official.

"That's mighty polite of you, Gettum, but our-all corn needs Sandy for the hilling. What's the special occasion?"

"The special occasion"—Stannard spat deliberately and far before finishing—"is murder in the first degree. It ain't the charge I'd cal'calated on taking one of yourn on, Tom, but I reckon it will hold as good as any. We'll try to give the boy as comfortable a time as can be——"

"Mighty polite of you," Tom repeated, with no particular change of expression. "Won't you-all light and come in?"

"You bet we will, since Dr. Prosch intends to take back the body as well as him what laid it low. The first and likeliest place to search, we're agreed, is this house."

The hint of a twinkle flashed in Tom's eyes. "You're welcome. We-all are right proud of our house. Doubt if you'll find what you're looking for, although there is a *particeps criminis* critter inside that may do as well."

Cordially he gestured the two into the living-room and invited their attention to its objects of interest—the decorative frieze of the newspaper wall-covering, the solidity of a table now serving the fourth generation, the inherited Metcalf leaning toward art as represented by Vernaluska's jugs.

The girl, sensing his idea in this game of delay, played a hand of her own. She brightened; chatted first with one and then the other; conducted them, as if on a pleasure tour, through the dining-room, kitchen, and family chambers. A tuneless twanging it was that focused the visitors' suspicion upon the one closed door.

"Sandyred!" muttered Stannard, clamping a masterful hand on the knob. Stealthily he opened the door and crossed the sill.

Dr. Prosch followed, his dimpled fists doubled to aid in any emergency.

After them came Vernaluska, her heart hurting with anxieties, both for the man who was within and him who was not. Miss Emmy, Asa Simms and Old Tom brought up in the rear.

Just within, they all stopped short from varied causes.

The eyes of the man on the bed dilated, glanced among them.

"Parker—*alive?*" Sheriff Stannard rasped.

"Why, yes, I think so." That Cal Parker smile which yesterday Vernaluska had invoked in vain, wavered around one corner of his mouth.

"But with a near-fatal wound on him somewhere, which it is my professional duty to examine." The pudgy practitioner recovered from the situation's crux and strutted toward the patient.

"Thank you, but I have a doctor and a nurse. I am satisfied—don't wish to change."

The sheriff had hectored away his surprise by a noisy clearing of his throat. He now showed himself prepared for anything.

"I feared worse results from this attempt on your life, Mr. Parker.

"Attempt on my life?"

"You need not fear, brother officer of the law, that the guilty can escape the justice of Gettum Stannard, at your service, any more than if you'd actually been finished. All you've got to do is to accuse; *I* do the rest. I await your word, sir, to do my duty."

The little official drew himself up and scowled effectively.

"But what duty?" Parker spoke somewhat irritably.

"To arrest the ruffian that drilled you, likewise all that aided and abetted. I get 'em, try 'em, punish 'em—according to Hoyle and Blackstone. Don't you fear that we're outnumbered, for my posse

awaits without—the house is completely surrounded. In view of your daring service to the community and State, this here attack on you had ought to be made a horrible example of. We have the word of a competent eye-witness, but we want your declaration.”

In the pause, silence tortured the seconds. Miss Emmy, despite her nerve-control at the recent operation, was trembling. Simms's eyes, seeing in imagination the last demijohn of his most profitable “inside goods” turned upside down, shifted from face to face. The grin had deserted Old Tom's weathered countenance, the chuckles his throat. And Ver-naluska——

She felt she could not endure to look at him whose life they had saved for this debacle, yet she could not look away. When she saw his lips begin to move, it seemed she must scream to silence his words, but she listened with dread intensity. She must not resent his statement of facts, she reminded herself; she must be fair. He owed them nothing, not even their care of him, since a life dear to them must be paid for his life. He had reason to hate her brother besides that of the mountain attack, if all Sandy had told of the carnival was true. She had witnessed his resentment against Currie for the “doctoring” of the liquor he had drunk—how much more ruthless it must be against Sandy who, as she understood, had pressed it upon him!

Yesterday she had called him back from the borderland with the cry of her heart. Through his flaccid lips she had poured her own life-breath, with no thought but for the unutterable loss of him. Had she let him cross over, had she remembered in time her influence over Currie, another explanation of

the accident might have been invented and established—Sandy might the more easily have been saved. And yet, she could not regret. And yet——

Prosch had limbered his throaty tones:

"Don't hesitate, Parker of the Revenue, don't you ever hesitate! You will be amply protected, wounded though you be. I myself will stay here with you until you are strong enough to move, provided the sheriff will leave a special guard. Name the name of the man that shot you down."

"Tom Metcalf——"

Parker raised his head slightly as he spoke; started to turn toward the door; at once collapsed from the pain of the attempt.

A low moan escaped Vernaluska, as she crossed to the bedside.

"Not my pappy! No, no, Cal, you don't dast name my pappy!"

"The old stiller himself, eh? Thank God—at last!"

"Thank me!"

The last two exclamations punctuated a scuffle at the door, instigated by Prosch and the official of significant sobriquet.

"That's right, bring him closer," said Parker weakly. Trying somewhat ineffectually to smile up at the girl, he added: "I just wanted to make sure he was among those present."

Elation, as well as his black mustache, decorated the sheriff's face when, with revolver drawn, he produced and started to manipulate a pair of handcuffs.

"Suffering possums, what's this all about?" demanded the trapped lion in a bellow.

"Just a minute, I'll explain." Obviously the

wounded man was making an effort to rise above his condition, to command his voice. "Nobody is to be arrested. You have been given a false report, sheriff. I know who made it. It was a scoundrel who, for reasons of his own, would like to get the Metcalfs into trouble. I guess you can take my word against that of a bootlegger, can't you?"

"But what is your word? Don't fear to tell the truth. Somebody must have shot." Stannard flourished his gun by way of reassurance, the bracelets dangling disappointedly in his other hand.

"Fear? I should say not! The accident came from a quarrel of my own with Rex Currie. I tried to take his pistol away from him and it went off in the scrap. The Metcalfs really saved my life. They are my friends. I feel sort of played out. Would you mind excusing me now? Thank you for coming, sheriff. Glad to have met you, Dr. Prosch."

When, a moment or so later, the dismissed avengers were filing out the door, the weary voice trailed after them.

"And, say, for the love of peace and quiet, forget this revenue stuff! As I said from the first, I'm not an officer—have no connection with the government. I am—just Cal Parker—private citizen—minding his own——"

The brilliant eyes had drooped from utter exhaustion when Vernaluska sank to her knees at the side of the bed. A question asked awhile back demanded answer.

"I—we-all believe at last," she murmured. "We *do* believe."

Old Tom leaned toward the two from the foot-piece of the bed. His voice had gentled unbeliev-

ably as he said: "I just want to say, Parkenman, that Sandy didn't know your drinks were buckeyed tother day. He told me so. The boy may get flighty, but he ain't that sort of a skunk."

"I'm glad to hear that—glad he didn't know." The assurance was scarcely more than a whisper.

Miss Emmy's tribute was sobbed into her apron as she followed her brother and Asa Simms out of the room.

The girl Vernaluska maintained her lowly posture beside the bed, hoping that her patient had passed into that sleep he so sadly needed, fearing to disturb him. A sudden question undeceived her.

"Verne, you are there?"

"Yes, Cal, right here."

From the remembrance awakened by the interchange, he smiled a moment into her eyes, then again the heavy lids dropped. Despite the pain of any movement his hand stole out and touched her head, smoothed it, settled on it. A quavering sigh suggested the reward he had found in the effort, told without words how, ever since that first day, he had wished to touch her hair, to realize its beauty through his sensitive artist fingers, as well as by sight.

All at once his eyes opened again and blazed with a look she never had seen in them before. His lips moved. She leaned toward him to catch their message.

"They can't put out—the bluest flame—that burns—for you!"

She watched him anxiously, hoping, praying that the interview in which he had exculpated her brother had not taxed him into delirium.

CHAPTER XXXII

EXTRA!

CALVIN PARKER had become sufficiently of the family to be trusted with the secret of the spring-wagon bed. Otherwise he would have been puzzled by the super-nervousness of Miss Emmy as she bade Godspeed to her brother, to Vernaluska, and to Sandyred one torrid morning two weeks after the futile visit of the Dismal Gap law-bringers.

On the face of it there was nothing about a jaunt over the mountains to the nearest county town in Tennessee to awaken such apprehension. The roads were said to be rough, it is true, but a broken axle or wheel could be mended at the roadside with no other price than delay. Since the little party of three intended to keep to the highroad, there was no danger of getting lost, even had they not made the journey many times before. And, by way of a "swapping" medium for the household necessities which they meant to bring back, what could have been more innocent than the sacks of ginseng root dug by the black hand of Cotton Eye Lee?

"What you want us to tote back for you, Emmy?"

Parker heard Old Tom put the question cheerfully, after wedging himself into the seat between Vernaluska and his son, who was to handle the grays.

"Your own selves, Tom—just tote your own

selves back to me," came the good soul's reply in a subdued sort of wail, her omnipresent apron held in readiness to coöperate with her emotions.

The next call was aimed at the window of the room which had served Parker through convalescence. "You'd calculate that we-all was going funeralin', eh, Cal? You-uns will look out for everything and keep her mind offen us? Miss Emmy can worry a power once she gets started. Seeing all goes well, we'll be back as long as to-morrow-day noon."

In the light of Parker's understanding, he accepted this commission. When, however, he realized later from her rejoinders that he could not keep her mind "offen" the secret of their vehicle, he invited her attention "onto" it.

What could be more clever than that false bottom built into the spring-wagon, he argued; what more deceptive than the green paint which, with his facility at colors, he had helped Sandyred mix to match the original bed, lately rebuilt? Were not the seams of the inner vat so carefully calked with yarn that not a telltale drop of the many gallons of "blockade" being escorted to market could trickle through?

But Miss Emmy's mood continued morose. She "suffered under powerful intuitions" that day, she told him.

That the three had gone armed augured a fear of trouble along the way. That Tom had pressed a revolver upon Parker, by way of home defense, suggested unnamed possibilities. Rex Currie's defection in the report of the shooting continued to oppress her mind—Rex, whom she had "handed victuals" for so many years. His immediate knowl-

edge of the workings of the still and the probable date of completion of this last batch hung like a pall over her.

Vainly did the out-Norther assume for her benefit a confidence which he did not feel. Vainly did he point that the process had been rushed to completion hours ahead of time. The intense humidity, presaging a downpour which threatened the comfort of her loved ones, he called a good omen. Was it not to outspeed the storm and avoid the later delay of muddy roads that the expedition had started two whole days earlier than at first considered possible?

The work of clearing away all traces of recent activity at the mountain still might safely be entrusted to Cotton Eye. She must not suspect that everyone was a traitor just because Currie had been. The black man, he assured her, was partisan to the last volt of the quart of "electricity," which was to be his bonus for a faithful discharge of the commission.

Not a sound or hoof-track of surveillance had been detected through the active past week, he reminded her, either by Sandy or Verne, who had ridden guard over the finishing process. The sacks of roots should satisfy the curiosity of any one met on the road as to the object of the trip. Once across the State line, adequate protection would be supplied by the "blind pigs" whose store was to be replenished. This wholesale, wagon-bed traffic into Tennessee, rather than the retail bootlegging of the past, was assuredly a master policy. The wagon itself was a triumph, the departure from precedent a stroke to upset any preparedness of the Dismal Gap drys.

Miss Emmy tried—he could see that—but she did not cheer. Through the open door in the living-room, he could hear her muttering fragments reminiscent of the hymnal and prayer-book as she undertook the task upon whose completion she had set her faithful heart by way of surprising the family on their home return.

The finishing touch to their great annual cleaning, perhaps the most terrible joy of mountain housewives, had been postponed in favor of the greater issue. Half re-papered, the living-room had been left in a state of negligée by the younger pair, to whom was usually entrusted the fine art of its decoration. The spinster's devout utterances were now and then profaned by the vocal perusal of headlines from this or that newspaper or pictorial, a supply of which Sandy had procured for the wall-covering process on his last visit to the Gap.

Evidently feeling the responsibility of supervision over the night-readings of those advanced youthful minds, she pattered about among stacks of "literature"; created, at last, a selected pile; clipped and muttered, muttered and clipped this into convenient strips. In the kitchen she prepared a "wash-hand bowl" of flour paste, sopped into it with the hearth brush of wild sedge; puffed from floor to bench and back again in her neat applications.

The convalescent found relief rather than offense in her preference for being alone with her anxieties, her prayers and her work. It gave him a chance to think out certain personal issues which had been pushed aside by the one great question of the week.

In the first place, why had Verne driven with her menfolk over the line that day?

He knew she had not intended to go, also that her company was not desired by them for reasons of her own comfort and safety. Several times he had heard them planning the rest she should have, once the "bumblings" were started on their way.

Parker had noted her exhaustion from the physical and mental overstrain when she had ridden in from a long-hour day of scouting in the saddle. Vigorously he had cursed the contretemps which incapacitated him from shouldering her task himself. He had begrudged every hour to the time when she might relax, had anticipated the departure of the two men as creating opportunity for a semi-explanation which had come to seem the most important event on his calendar.

And last night, during the brief general gathering in his room, which had come to be habitual, the end of his near-Arcadia had come so suddenly that he could scarce realize he was now without the gates.

Verne had announced and defended her intention to go along. She needed things, she declared—a dress, hat, some books—what not. Did they think a girl was satisfied to stay shut-in forever? She wanted her share of the fun as well as the work. She had made up her mind to go; they ought to know what that meant. *She was going to go.*

This, as a climax, had followed an announcement of his own, dropped like a bomb into Sandy's repinings that they were so soon to be changed from affluent outlaws into impecunious tar-heels—these varied by Old Tom's sly insistence that they wouldn't "tar-heel it long" after he got his flames

a-burning. Once the matter of that last distillation had been brought to a satisfactory close, Parker had said, he must leave them for a trip of his own—a trip to New York. At the protest of his most devoted admirer, the recalled Sandyred, he had assured them that they were far from seeing the last of him. He would be back, and that shortly.

From the perspective of to-day he could see the cause back of Verne's sudden determination. Her suppression of any comment, her avoidance of his eyes, the slow flush that had shown through her tan, then as slowly receded, her refusal to enter his room alone when, early this morning, he had called her—all filled him with pain only endurable from the joy that throbbed through it. He had so hoped that her fleeings had ceased. And this morning, dressed in the organdie frock with lavender sash which she once had boasted, its splendors protected by a demure gray cape, she had run away—from him!

There could be no doubt about it. Not one good-by smile had she directed through the window from under the wide straw hat, trimmed with roses, which had made her look so unusually lovely.

Verne distrusted him again—and this time on a subject which she would not discuss. Whether she realized or not, she must care something for him, else why that pumping upward of her heart's blood at mention of his plan to go away?

Doubtless she had heard gossip from Dismal Gap anent his engagement to the recent fair visitor—a tidbit of news circulated by that medium more comprehensive than the press, Mistress Hootie Plott. She would connect this with her memory of Sylvia's photograph and with his assurance that she of the

childlike expression was a "woman grown," that her he respected above all women, except for what she would consider the sake of his "manners"—herself.

He could see it all now. In those first few hours of his recovery, before Miss Emmy had been pressed into the post of substitute nurse and Verne freed for more taxing duties outside, she probably had noticed the words in his eyes, in the touch of his hand—the words he did not speak. She had waited until last night, in the supposition that something real, something definite was to come of his suppressed feeling for her. But since his statement that he was about to leave the region, she had concluded herself the victim of illusion, him a predatory male.

If Verne had her way, he told himself, he probably would not have one private word with her before he left. Well, he would not go without it—that was all! There was not much he could say without getting the whole host of dead-and-gone Parkers and Calvins down on him. But just one little reassuring word, one last plea for the benefit of doubt which before she had granted, one look from his craving soul when they were quite alone—these he would have, even though he broke the letter of the inherited law. It crucified him to have Verne doubt him again.

Fortunate, he thought, that he had formed the habit early in life of having his own way! He grinned every time he remembered how he had started out in the early morn of that last eventful day abroad, driven by the determination to "insist" himself into the Metcalf household. Well, he had done it, hadn't he?

He must get things settled, he now adjured himself impatiently; must get Verne and himself started on the long, radiant together-path, he to help her, she him. There need be no delay about going to Fall-away Rim to pack, since, several days before, in pretended anxiety lest his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Boomer, need food, and in real anxiety over his masterpiece portrait of Verne, he had sent Cotton Eye Lee on a carting expedition. Best of all, he was beginning to feel fit physically, although that "drill" of Sandyred's had come mighty close to the heart. His convalescence had been rapid beyond all calculation. He took satisfaction in his rallying capacity, made possible by his natural endowment of strength and stamina, to a large measure restored by his comparatively abstemious weeks at the cabin. Then, too, a man with hope in every pulse-beat had every recuperative chance in his favor.

The wound had proved to be a clean one, although the variation of a fraction of an inch in its placement would have closed his life account with the entry "instantly killed." Once the shock of it and of the subsequent probing operation was over, once his fever was spent, there had been nothing to interfere with its speedy closing. Now he resolved to call upon the reserve battalions of his will to hurry him toward recovery.

"Miss Emmy!"

Several minutes later, the summons brought the spinster to the spare-room door and something of a shock. Her charge, no longer bath-robe garbed, but fully dressed, was trying his strength back and forth across the room.

"After our-all care over you, that's no way to

be doing," she protested, advancing toward him, a goodly bulk of indignation. "Now, you'd best lie down in bed awhile and rest up after——"

"Never not!"

He grinned down at her, always diverted over helping himself to the dialect which had come to sing all the music of the spheres to him.

"I'm through," he continued, "with all unseasonable use of beds and bedding—they weren't intended for daytime. The air's stifling in here around noon. I'm going to sit a while in the living-room."

"Tom allowed you-uns were a right tame person," she deplored, "else he'd never have left you in the hands of one weak woman."

"But a woman who is sensible and is going to help me get well in the quickest way. I don't want to take any unfair advantage of you, dear Miss Emmy, but you mustn't take advantage of me, and it is doing just that to make me stay in here playing invalid. Come, I'll enjoy my trip from this room into that so much more if you'll agree with me! Don't you think it will do me good to have a not-too-decided change of climate if I'm quiet and blatty and lamblike?"

"Will you Bible-oath it?"

"Cross my heart and hope to——"

"Sh! Best not hope that when we-all have just done raised you."

"Hope to live, I was about to say."

The Parker persuasiveness proved too much for a lady who had spent the greater part of her life accommodating herself to the superior will of two young insurgents of her own.

"You-uns have got such common ways!" she ex-

claimed, as she bustled about the living-room, to miss none of the balsam and goose-feather cushions in her collection.

Parker took no offense at her expression; he recognized it as a compliment—her way of declaring him one of them.

Tom's huge chair she tugged to a place beside the window. The cushions she prodded around her charge as he settled into it. She stood off to regard him, by some mental process seeming to have mixed the origination of the moving idea.

"So la, you do look a whole heap better already, just like I claimed you would! Sit your hunkers there and talk to me while I finish up this pasting job. I must say it's as sticky and slow as molass' in the winter-time, but it will be right smart of a surprise to Verney to find it finished."

With pride and anxiety struggling for precedence on her comely face, she gestured over the wall lately decorated.

"All of it I got right end up," she continued, "leaving out the picture of yon lady with the outlandish hat. She has got a right upset look. The fine reading that was printed around her, I pasted nigh against the window. You-uns can read it easy there, the light comes in so strong."

She paused, noting that her audience of one seemed to be distracted. After giving that "upset" picture a glance, he had leaned to read the fine print indicated as "nigh against" the window before which he sat.

"Likely you *would* enjoy the news, being an outsider!" she apologized for his inattention, more as if to herself than him. "One thing, it ain't never

stale, seeing as we-all house-clean twice a year. Sandy in partic'lar ain't got no patience reading last year's papers when we might just as well——"

Snatching the very word with which she stopped, Parker reëntered the conversation.

"Well, I'm damned!"

Her righteous stare rebuked him.

"I mean I—I'm blest!"

His succeeding utterances were intense as, with hands reached out to push aside the curtains of pine-cones, he leaned down to read toward the base-board.

"It's from the *Herald*. No doubt it's true. Say, Miss Emmy, that intuition you were suffering from is right—something *is* going to happen! Can't you stop them?"

He got to his feet and strode toward her excitedly.

"Stop them? Stop who?"

"Verne, Sandy—your brother! But of course you can't. There isn't a telephone or—or anything. I suppose there's nothing to do but wait. My God, I shall stifle from this combination of heat and inactivity!"

Although not exactly relieved, he was diverted by the sound of footsteps shuffling across the porch.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SHORT WARNING

ABIDE-WITH-ME SHORTOFF was standing on the door-sill, peering in, the manner and look of him furtive.

"You, Bide?" Miss Emmy's superfluous remark was none too cordial.

"Hello, Shortoff," said Parker. "You surprised us. How's the corn doing?"

The mountain farmer crossed the room to a stand before his one-time neighbor. There was obvious excitement behind his somewhat unrelated remarks.

"I'm watching it grow. Admire to see you-uns up again. I left Sally hoeing over the hilltop, but she'll soon miss me and like as not follow. It's right hard having to work with a woman, eat with her, sleep with her—never get away. She's a dinged sight worse than the conscience she allows I've done got along so far without. But I'd best be wagging my tongue. I be ready, Parker, to talk business. Have you got some on your hip—some to sell?"

"Some what, my friend?"

Parker reseated himself and indicated a chair for the visitor. But Bide seemed in no mood for rest. He shuffled after the younger man and leaned over him, his fingers twisting and untwisting.

"You-uns ain't got no call to be afeard of me. I've come here to pay you a favor if you'll pay me

one back. I got the wherewithal at last to buy a jug of the juice. Made it beating straws for Rex Currie down to the carnival. Hid it in a holler tree afore I came home, so Sal ain't wise. Tom knows I ben't no dry at heart. As for you-uns, I was certain sure from first sight that you wa'n't no reve-nuer."

He slunk one hand into a side pocket of his baggy jeans and suggestively jangled a small collection of coin.

"There ain't no time to lose." He cast an uneasy glance toward the door. "She's likely trailing me, I tell you. If you-uns got any handy, leave me have it, so's I can slip outen the back."

"And what's this favor you've got to swap?"

"The drys are plumb onto you. The real revenue slicks have done arrived."

Bide evidently thought direct thrust the speediest course toward the end he so devoutly desired.

With a chirp as of a menaced mother-bird, Miss Emmy sought a chair. "There's been premonitions using in my head for days. Before come the light of this morning I woke up with a feeling that——"

Its exact nature was bagged in her apron.

"Real slicks?" Parker started to laugh, then, from certain crowding fears of his own, as well as from respect for those of the anxious relative, controlled himself. "How do you know, Bide? What are they going to do?"

"I squeezed it easy-like outen Sal. With a peart wife a married man's got to lead a kind of tricky life—leastways he's obliged to if ever he hopes to get a few swigs on the quiet. Them new foreigners carry papers from the gover'ment and badges

and a right smart say-so. There's going to be a soon raid, and they've done offered a reward to the guide as can show them a short-cut. This here warning shows I'm wet all through, don't it? My hide wouldn't be worth tanning nohow if Sal caught me giving it. Considering as how to-morrow's going to be too late, will you sell me that jug or——"

"Your hide's worse than tanned a-ready!"

The interruption announced a calico streak that had slithered through the door into their midst. Sally Shortoff, woodswoman and militant wife, descended upon her refractory mate.

With a shrill cry he so inappropriately named leaped for the nearest of the several rear doors. But he was stopped short in the accomplishment of retreat.

"Best wait a minute, Bide—I'm gunned, and a powerful good husband-hitter at that."

In view of the shotgun bearing upon him, Bide turned body and mind to escape other than by way of his legs.

"Nobody's earned a better right to shoot down a man-hound than his own wife," she commented in tempered approval. "Now you step lively along of me and make some fire-wood. I'll see to it you do chores close to the cabin until after—leastways until I say. Reckon you won't need a dose of the county jail along with the rest of the law-breakers and liars—not after I get through with you."

Judging himself referred to, Parker responded with a pleasantry. "And how does our fair man-tamer find herself this afternoon?"

The outraged expression on her soda-biscuit face belied any generic weakness for flattery.

"Able to struggle along under the cross of he-traitors, praise God!" she replied, her rich drawl crisped. "May He lam you like you deserve—He knows I've got *my* hands full with Bide. If I keep my own man dry—and I'm aiming to or kill the no-'count critter what I took for better instead of worse—I'll be entitled to my crown o' glory. All I got to say to you-uns is you'd best break away from that Jezebel Verney what's done sired you while yet there is time."

"But my dear lady——"

Evidently she was in no mood for the Parker manners.

"La, you needn't waste breath denying it! Just have a care, say I. This here ain't no country to be trifling with females, nohow. Such as ain't able to look after their own rights, gets 'em looked after by others, and Tom Metcalf, if he keeps out of jail long enough, will have you nagging with that she-kin of his'n along to a minister of the Gospel before you can save your——"

"Sally Shortoff, you git up and outen here!"

Something more threatening than the shotgun faced the lady of advices—a fair, fat and forty tigress in defense of her own. "Don't you dast bandy the name of our Verney, or I'll——"

"Scant need of my bandying." The gangly woman folded her arms against her barren breasts as she outstared the buxom one. "All the Gappers know, and likely all their cousins and their second cousins know what's been going on up here. None blames Rex Currie for leaving the pretty jade in the lurch. There's maybe more to Verney's smiles

than you see. I got a right to say my say, for none can claim *I ain't* filling my virtue vows."

To a glance of infinite love toward him she had just assailed, she added a command: "Slope along, now, you critter, what I'm going to learn, sure enough, to abide with me!"

Bide "sloped."

CHAPTER XXXIV

TO-NIGHT'S THE NIGHT

CAL PARKER helped Miss Emmy get supper that evening, as was fitting, in view of the fact that he consumed so much of it. To get square on his feet—that was now his greatest concern. The invalid rôle should hold him not another day or night.

With pity he observed that the devoted soul struggled for what cheer she showed, so heavy was the weight of worry on her shoulders. At every sound she started with dread for what might be about to be, shivered from relief over what was not. So often did her apprehensive eyes consult the clock during the long-drawn-out hours, that many stitches were dropped in the hug-me-tight, she was knitting to fit the manly proportions of Sandyred. Her devoutly moving lips showed that her attention was more upon prayer for the safety of the absentees than the conversation of her patient-guest.

From Miss Emmy, Parker got a better idea of what Verne must have suffered through her recent years of effort to get the family within the law than from anything the girl herself had said or done. In vain he assured her that the heat was oppressing her more than any likelihood of catastrophe, that the excursionists into Tennessee would return betimes, with money jingling as gaily as Old

Tom's reiterated assurance that the newer, safer life should start on that day.

It was her nature to rejoice over small mercies, she declared; yet she "intuited" that something had gone amiss. The fact that Cotton Eye Lee, sent early in the day to clear out all traces of the temporary still, had not returned by bedtime did nothing toward dispelling these forebodings. Neither was she cheered by Parker's request that she dress his shoulder with bandages which she pronounced unnecessarily taut and heavy.

Wontedly the earliest riser in the house, she found only a note to greet her when, shortly after day-break, she roused from a troubled sleep.

Gone with Cotton to the clearing house. Hope to beat your intuitions back.

CALVIN PARKER.

One word of this message was fiction. Parker had not gone *with* Cotton, but after him. When his early investigation of the barn had showed the presence of neither the black man nor the white mule, he had rewarded the greetings of Teetotaler with a one-armed saddle-and-bridle throw.

Later, a vehement hee-haw from Solomon preceded the sight of the little hybrid tied to a tree at the base of Grumbly Bald. The mule snorted and jerked at his rope with unusual irritation, evidently having suffered there all night. With nostrils a-quiver, he seemed to be trying to impart some complaint.

"What's the matter, old chap?" Teetotaler's whinnies asked in equine parlance. "Are you just

upset with all-overs after a bad night, or are you, Solomon, really wise to something gone wrong?"

At least, thus Parker chose to interpret the exchange. He gave the mule water from the near-by branch, then took both animals in lead. Turning into the rhododendron thicket at the spot where he had been so unexpectedly and so near-fatally halted on the occasion of his last visit, he had small difficulty in locating the improvised manufactory of contraband, as he had since been entrusted with full details of the wood-craft that covered it.

After tying the animals outside, he stooped and peered through what served as doorway. Beside the temporary, rock-built furnace, lay the object of his search—Cotton Eye Lee, with arms outstretched, head thrown back, mouth agape.

Parker reached the prone figure at one bound, and dropped to his knees for an examination—a certain experience of his own having fore-place in his mind. At once he congratulated himself that his right arm, grown incredibly strong from guidance of his wall-eyed steed, had not been the one disabled by Sandy's bit of lead. He gripped the negro's jumper and began a jouncing calculated to recall to sensibility any one not actually dead. Effect of this muscular alarm was slow; but eventually Cotton Eye groaned, batted his lids, forced them sufficiently open for recognition.

"Leave me be, you infernal revenuer!" he protested. "You ain't no call to be grappling me. You're sick abed!"

Naturally Parker omitted to obey. "You're the one that's abed. Get up! You haven't started the work you were sent to do. What do you mean—

lying around in this condition when time is so important?"

Cotton Eye sat up, a species of indignation coming to the fore of his lethargy. "Ain't every inebriated genul'man got the natural-born right to sleep it off?"

There was no apology in this admission of the sad truth. There were, rather, signs of pride as well as debauch in the look of him.

"Where did you get the makings of a jag?"

Parker put the question in sincere perplexity. Tom had promised his dusky aide a quart of bumblings, but as a reward after the task of "busting up" had been accomplished, and had taken care that every drop of the last distillation had been removed beyond his reach.

The answer in words was succinct, but expanded by a proudful grin.

"Sniffin's!"

"Sniffings? You mean to say that you——"

"That no man needs drink, nohow, when he can sniff. Prognosticate your head inside yon covered tub, cap'n; yank the top clost around; pull your coat up to stuff the cracks; then keep a-sniffin', deep and long. There ain't no need, as I can observate, for the fumes to travel down the throat and then up again to the head when by sniffin' them strong, they'll go straight up."

Parker stared at the brazen propounder of this discovery, then did sniff at the quandom container. The strong reek of uncured liquor which assailed his nostrils supported the claim of the black. With a stern front, he turned upon the delinquent, still sitting his haunches with the receptive attitude of

one awaiting congratulations due after the accomplishment of something worth while against great odds.

"I'd hate to be in your shoes when Old Tom hears how you've betrayed your trust."

"But you-uns can't tell him I've drunk anything. I ain't had a nary drop—only sniffin's. Ain't every living man judmatically entitled to sniffin's, cap'n?"

Impatiently Parker interrupted the defensive whine. "Get your worthless body right side up, according to the law of gravity; douse your befuddled head into——"

The irrepressible just naturally had to interrupt because of two words he never had heard before.

"Gravity—gravity," he mumbled. "Defuddled—defud——"

Parker was not to be stopped. "You'll dip it into the pail of water I bring from the creek and get yourself ready to help me wipe this blockade factory off the face of the map before it's too late."

His energetic start was stopped at the door by a raucous laugh. From the bush outside, Rex Currie straightened his considerable self, the look of the laugh on his face.

"It's too late already for you, but not for me," he taunted.

Parker's free hand flashed to his hip; he pulled up, ready for the finish of the fight. To his amazement, however, Currie made no hostile move, his eyes busy with the details of the still house. All of a sudden the hillbilly's whole scheme flashed through Parker's brain, made him see redder than

the buckeye juice which had reduced him to impulse at the carnival. He forgot his wound—everything except the lust to grapple with and destroy this mountain enemy who was always in the way, whose ambition was, through treachery, to gain the reward of the world.

"Too late, Currie? Your watch is fast—it's never too late by mine!" he challenged, and sprang into attack.

The hillbilly, despite the advantage in his favor, did not meet the issue. Mayhap he had learned discretion of valor in that other combat on the cabin ledge. More likely he had attained his object in the definite location of the removed Metcalf still with the presence of Parker in the rôle of destroyer. Assuredly, if they ever got Cotton Eye to court, they could count on him as witness, black weather-vane that he was. Howbeit, in a flash, Currie disappeared into the brush.

Parker, not wishing to shoot unless necessary, followed close until he saw his quarry's horse waiting with dropped bridle on the semi-trail that led to the cabin. Realizing that, unmounted, he would lose the race at its start, he turned back and put himself to reach Teetotaler in the shortest possible time.

The chances were against him, as he realized. Before he was in the saddle, Currie must have reached the highway. The speed of his one-eyed mount was never that of a pace-setter, and now seemed fated to be retarded.

At each low growl of the thunder which was intermittently uttering promises of relief from the heat, Tee would balk, shudder, and essay a bolt

toward the Metcalf barn. It took vigilance and a grip of steel to hold him reasonably straight.

Certain that Currie was on his way to the authorities to "turncoat" on the Metcalfs, Parker's mind was intolerant of the chances against him. He wanted Currie, and drove his beast as never before.

Just once, as he thundered around a curve in the forest-fringed road, did he sight the family enemy ahead. Instantly he was reminded of the revolver which Old Tom, on leaving for the trip across the mountains, had pressed upon him. Averse as he was to gun-play, he dropped rein long enough to send several warnings ahead. Although, as he had noticed, Currie was armed, no reply barked back.

Teetotaler was uncommonly sound of wind, and put the next two miles behind him at satisfactory speed. This brought them to the valley where the road straightened out to a considerable view.

Yet there was no sign of the pursued; nothing animated except a light-colored team which approached at leisurely gait along the road that turned into the highway for a final dip into Dismal Gap. To Parker it seemed impossible that Currie could have outdistanced him so greatly. The driver of the team was a possible source of information, and he spurred ahead to cut short the time of waiting. On drawing nearer, he recognized the railroad stage, with Tobe Riker on the box. Early as it seemed for the mail, he wasted no questions.

"Did you see Rex Currie cut past toward Dismal?" he demanded as he pulled up.

"Nope—hair nor hide of nobody. Leastwise, not yet."

"Not yet? Did you expect to see him?"

"Wouldn't have surprised me none."

"Nor me. I've been hot after him for half an hour. He can't have headed me far."

"What you chasing Rex for?"

Something akin to guilt—at least of self-consciousness—behind this question made Parker give the noncommittal driver a sharp glance.

"Come across, yourself, Riker! Why did you say seeing him wouldn't have surprised you any? Why have you lashed your horses into foam and then slowed them near this crossing?"

The little whip scanned the horizon, watched a hawk in its volplaning, then delivered himself of another enigmatic reply.

"'Pears like it's worth my while to believe in signs—I'm chasing them."

Parker left off considering him in favor of the situation. If Riker was telling the truth—and from his carnival overture there seemed no reason why he should not—the hillbilly must be lurking somewhere behind him. Should he ride further toward Dismal and lie in wait or carry his search backward?

"I got a small passel of news this morning that'll likely make you-uns set up," the driver volunteered. "There come a pair of sure-enough revenue slicks to the Gap yesterday."

"That's stale news," Parker snapped. "I suppose that they, too, have slowed down, also being believers in signs?"

The driver threw a frightened glance around. "Can't say as I get you."

"I mean, Riker, that they, as well as you, are

waiting for Currie to locate the Metcalf still, when they intend to swoop up and arrest Old Tom and Sandy and me, an accessory, if they can get their hands on us. I mean that you are a more miserable turncoat than Currie ever dreamed of being. To think that any man, for the sake of twenty-five dollars——”

“Don’t you call me cuss-names! I won’t leave any man insult me to my face, even if——”

“Even if,” Parker insisted, determined to substantiate the conclusions which had come to him, “you are hired to wait around and help him help himself to Miss Metcalf.”

“Who—who told you that?”

“You did, in spite of your care not to! He’s been insinuating into her mind all along that she, too, is likely to be arrested. He hopes to stampede her, through fear, into an escape with him. I thought that you admired her yourself?”

The swain nodded. “That’s why I gave you a chance to take a hand to save her.”

“And if I didn’t take a hand, you’d see Currie through his contemptible scheme?”

“When you’ve clean run outen hope of getting a girl,” the driver offered in mournful excuse, “it don’t matter much which other man gets her. I’d rather it wouldn’t be Rex; but I could do with the twenty-five. Of course Rex allows Verney will splice up with him to get her good name back, onct it’s gone by his taking her to Tennessee. He’s a double-dealing dog, sure enough. I’d kinda hoped that you-uns, as she seemed to take a shine to at first sight——”

The flow of Riker's speech was arrested by Parker's expression.

The latter stood in his stirrups, peering toward the high-line of the horizon. There a pillar of smoke lifted into the low-hanging sky.

"Looks to be on Fallaway Rim!" he exclaimed. "There's nothing around there to burn except—My cabin must be afire!"

Riker turned on the box, peered, straightway yielded to excitements of his own.

"It's the signal, by gum! Dry Dryden gave 'em leave to burn her as a contribution to the cause and a judgment on you for fooling them so long. Currie's done found the still, and the posse will soon be on the way. I'd best be skitting along, stranger."

Having gathered up his reins, he paused, then lowered a cautious word, as if fearful that his splotch-freckled grays might hear.

"To-night's the night I was telling you about. By dark I'm to be waiting at the mouth of Roaring Fork. If the man what hires me loses a piece of baggage along the way, that hadn't ought to cut the driver's price none, had it? I'm counting on you to act, Mr. C. A. Parker, of New York!"

Act he must, and at once. Parker did not need to be told that. He fully realized it.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BALD GRUMBLES

As the lumbersome vehicle, which once before had upset him and his calculations, went spinning down the road, Parker readjusted his plan. No need now to intercept Currie on his way to Dismal Gap, since the news of his discovery already had been waved to them on a sky-high banner of smoke. No time was there to waste, searching for a hillbilly in the woods he knew so well, nor strength to spare over the personal indulgence of conquering him single-handed.

The revenue officers who were to inspect the evidence of the Metcalf guilt would soon start on their way. For the time being, Verne was safe with her father and brother, probably driving back with them somewhere along the mountain road from Tennessee. There was one chief thing left for him to attempt. Turning Teetotaler, he struck into the back-track.

"If you and I are up to it," he urged the horse, "those 'infernals' won't find any evidence or take any prisoners, and Lochinvar Currie will elope by himself—if able to go at all!"

Everything in nature showed offense at his decision. It would seem that Old Tom, who had advanced his last blockade trip because of a coming "stem-twister," was about to be proved a prophet

with honor in his own land. The foregoing oppressively sultry night had been followed by a day of unwonted heat. Although no breath of wind relieved the drooping green things along the woodsy road, more frequent rumbles shuddered the altitudes. Ink-dark clouds formed low, only to scatter downward in making way for darker ones above. Not a squirrel or rabbit was abroad, it seemed; nor could chirp of feathered thing be heard. In the portent, all-pervasive hush, the thud of the piebald's hoofs sounded like defiance to high command.

Parker held his left shoulder stiffly and high against the jolt of his going, mindful that he must not undo the work of those who had cared for him. The prospect of a rain-storm exhilarated him. No drenching, he felt, could chill blood at boiling heat, as was his. To-day's realization of the whole painstaking scheme to seize that night what to Parker was the most precious thing on earth——

At mere thought of Currie's intention his mood made that of nature seem a childish pet.

His attempt to turn in at the branch brought vigorous protest from Teetotaler, who had stretched himself willingly to that point. Obviously the protest came from fear of the oncoming storm and hope of stable shelter. The turn was made, however, and soon the sight of Solomon, tugging at the rope which held him prisoner among the rhododendrons, rewarded him.

On re-entering the still-house, Parker's disappointment was keen. The black had done nothing observable, except adjust himself to a sitting posture, his back planted against the stone furnace.

"Get up and fall to, you sloth!"

Parker put an exclamation point to this command with the toe of his boot.

"Sloth—sloth," repeated the word-collector interestedly. "If you-uns had a sloth like mine, cap'n, you wouldn't get up for a week."

"Well, you're through slothing for the immediate present—that is, unless you want to continue your star act in jail. We've got less than an hour to turn the concrete of this blockade junk into abstract—into mere heresay—a false alarm, as it were. Here, lend a hand with this tub of mash! We're going to dump it into the creek."

Cotton batted his mismated eyes, then achieved an unsteady stand, but only to offer further objection.

"What's the abstract hurry, boss? They-all can never find this hide-out—not them hearsay officers."

"They don't need to find it. They know already where it is, and are on their way this minute. The first they'll handcuff is you!"

This information was ill-advised, as Parker realized from the ague of terror which instantly weakened the negro's none too reliable assistance.

"Lordy—oh, Lord!" he wailed, his eyes rolling upward until only their whites showed. "If them infernals are on their way, it's time for a concrete nigger to scoot. Nobody can't say I ain't a believer in Thee, O Lord, but it ain't religion to stay here and be cuffed like a infidel what never——"

"Likely this will give you more faith!"

Parker poked his steel persuader into the palpitating ribs. Its eloquence was at once manifest.

After the refuse had been consigned to the lively waters of the branch, and the containers thrown into

separated gullies, Parker directed his quaking "hand" to attack the lair of browse behind the log shack that held the still proper, to fell the supports and scatter the bush covering into the surrounding brush.

Alone, he undertook to wreck the distillery itself. First, he withdrew the worm, as the most tell-tale bit of evidence. This—Old Tom's treasured piece of "copper"—was quickly sunk in the creek. One-handed, and forced to vigilance lest his unwilling aide should desert, he disposed of other criminating articles until only the furnace and the structure itself remained. In tearing down the last, he decided to use Solomon and a rope—this after he had tried and failed to fire the fresh-cut timbers.

The hybrid understudy of Samson, when duly hitched to the end of a rope, was more successful. Eventually Parker saw the Metcalf "temple of hell" reduced to débris. There remained only the destruction of the stone furnace. Seeing no way of utilizing mule-muscle upon that, he attacked it with a pick. As his second blow struck there came from out the sky a clap like that of impending doom. Shuddering thunders smothered it, but not the shriek of near-by living things. The mule, the horse, and the negro were lifting pleas for mercy.

Although no rain had fallen, Old Tom's predicted "stem-twister" evidently had started to unwind. Suddenly the darkness had become sinister, the heat well-nigh stifling. Hearing Sol's frantic efforts to break loose, Parker hurried toward him, but just in time to see the little animal streaking down the creek toward home. Before he could reach Teetotaler, the horse, too, had broken his halter and taken the course of least resistance, evidencing

that he, at least, entertained no doubt that Solomon was really wise.

Through the unwonted daytime gloom, Parker stumbled back to the unsolved problem of the furnace and tried in vain to prod it apart. As if some super-lion were resisting his attack, renewed roars deafened him, the ground beneath him rocked.

He sprang back just in time. At his very feet a mouth of rocky earth opened in a grin, a growl, or, mayhap, a gape of weariness, and gulped the stubborn object of his assault—rocks, cement, all. He stared down, dazed at the sudden disappearance. The fissure-mouth did not widen, but continued to grin up at him, as if in derision at the puny attempts of mankind.

Springing across, Parker followed the whelplike wails of the negro. Cotton Eye lay groveling, face downward, on the ground, his hope of placating the storm gods seeming to rest upon his reiterated oath never, providing he was spared, to sniff "sniffins" again. His would-be rescuer might as well have expected assistance from a jelly-fish. In the imminent hour, Cotton was shaken by religion. Even the revolver prod proved to have lost its effectiveness.

When a lightning bolt shattered a nearby hemlock and brought it crashing to the ground, the penitent flattened, then lay still, evidently thinking himself hit and beyond the power of the last resort of prayer.

"Get up or I'll leave you alone with your God!"

Parker added a pedal argument.

Only a hopeless plaint replied. "It's done come ahead of schedulum—the end of the world! I

wasn't expecting the judgment day so soon. I ain't prepared—I'm bounden for hell-fire!"

In amen there burst a roar from the convulsed ground. Compared to the sky thunders—the crashing explosions of atmospheric voids high above—this was as the all-great blast of omnipotence to a whiff of wind. Repeatedly its rage was voiced, with cumulative virulence.

A terror more definite than that over his brimstone deserts brought the negro to his feet.

"Grumbly Bald—that there was the voice of the Bald!" he shrilled above the weather wails. "If he's going on one of his rampages, cap'n, there ain't no use to pray; we're worse than dead a'ready."

Cotton's despair reminded Parker of local reports about the mountain—of the volcano in its heart that had slumbered of recent years, but in the past had erupted in landslides which had cleft its sides and worn great wrinkles in its bare dome. When, in his pause for consideration, a fragment of rock from some shelf above leaped out at mysterious command and crashed downward, splintering all that resisted its course, he accepted the negro's conclusion.

A second descending missile, accompanied by the noise of cut-off trees and gritting boulders, made him realize the full urgency of the situation. One might lie prostrate in prayer to storm gods that spoke from the heavens, but to escape the spleen of fiends breaking loose from the earth beneath one took to flight.

Grasping the black by the collar, Parker half led, half dragged him into the creek. There the descent was more certain in footing, despite the splash of waters. To the utmost of his one-handed capacity, he strove to keep the fear-riven parcel of humanity

upright while struggling down the uncertain course; repeatedly dodged the following rush of dislodged rocks; avoided, as best he might, the face-lashing of back-flung branches that overhung the stream.

There came a moment when all sound ceased. It seemed as if the universe was drawing breath. The scowl of darkness deepened. The heat of supernatural wrath exuded from all pores in a pressure of humidity almost overpowering. Then, from out a thousand eyes, shot lightnings. Head, shoulders, body—the mountain seemed to rise and shake off its overcoat of earth. All the thunders from above and below united in one tremendous clap.

With a whimper of surrender, Cotton Eye Lee flopped in the creek. In vain Parker tugged at him, dipped his head into the rushing water, implored him to rise up and help save his own life. They would be overtaken, probably buried in the muck of the mountain if they paused—that he realized from the increasing bombardment above. There was possibly time to save himself, yet he could not leave a fear-palsied fellow to his fate.

Over and over, down the shallow branch, he managed to turn the hulk of the black, who clutched at root and rock to hinder his own salvation. Parker's strength, even his hope, was fast deserting him. He, too, had begun to stumble, frequently to fall. He had crouched with his self-imposed charge by the stream-side, had consigned their two lives to the mountain's mercy, when—"Cal! Oh, Cal! *Cal!*"

Like a summons from another world, the woman's call waved upward. Parker sprang again to his unequal task, made a thing of steel by a fear new and more vitalizing than his fear for himself.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DREAMS MADE REAL

FROM the other side of Roaring Fork there splashed to help him Old Tom and Sandyred, with Vernaluska in the lead. The team and spring-wagon, standing on the bank, told of their safe return and immediate departure in search of him.

The girl was almost inarticulate in her relief, even after all had reached the comparative safety of a hemlock-sheltered knoll across the main stream.

"When Miss Emmy told us-all where you had gone, with this storm coming on—— Afterward, when Sol and your horse tore past us on the road—— Well, Parkerman, empty saddles ain't cheering sights! I was afraid that you—that our judge of the hills——"

A deafening rumble silenced her.

Strong, triumphant, rang Old Tom's voice. "It's done come at last—*at last!*"

"Into the wagon, all of you," shouted Sandyred.

"We'd best make a dash for the clearing."

The old man refused to comply. The others must go, but without him.

"The end—I've waited all my life for this here end!" he exulted above crash and crumble.

Parker drew the mountain girl aside. Above his weariness, greater than the pain from his overtaxed

shoulder, more impelling than the mood of the elements, was his desire to be alone with her. In the noise of mere cataclysmic eruptions, mere destruction of forests and streams—loud above any struggle of life or death, was the whisper in his heart that must reach her ears.

“Verne,” he said quietly, “I love you.”

He had thought her pale before. Now, with the wide brim of her flower hat lifted by the wind that was beginning to move the hemlocks, he saw all color leave her lips and cheeks. She tore her eyes away from his, but not before he had seen that they were startled, resentful.

The demand which had held him by the roadside that carnival morn caught up with to-day.

“Do you love me, Verne?” he asked, then waited a moment in vain.

Although she had seized the hat brim and was holding it over her upper face, it failed to hide the fact that her lips were stiffly set.

“Because if you do love me”—he leaned toward her, that she might be sure to hear, but did not touch her—“if you do, I want you to tell me so. You do not trust me—I want you to conquer your distrust. Can’t you tell me—can’t you trust me, no matter what you *think*? You have entrusted all your material secrets to me, and I have not proved unworthy of you and yours, have I? This would mean so much to me, Verne. If you could trust me with this greater secret—could tell me what I want to know, you would make me very happy for all my life.”

She turned back to him, whether moved by his voice or the wilder winds. All the resentful lines

had smoothed from her face. She had yielded, he could see, to the fearless generosity that had made her supreme among women to him. Although her lips parted, she did not speak. Yet her face told that she had forgotten the storm. She lifted her arms to his neck and her face to his, not to invite, but to give their first kiss. She just gave him the kiss of her heart from modest lips that never had kissed for dear love's sake before.

So did Cal Parker's fondest dream come true.

This had been his hope of what she might one day do. He never forgot the moment. Amid nature's uproar, he stood absolutely still, realizing it. By not so much as a movement toward her of his hand did he spoil the divine voluntariness of it—that moment in which his world was won.

Only when she shrank away from him with a low, hurt cry did he understand that she doubted his appreciation; only then did he clutch her to him as if never to let her go, did he murmur the relief that was almost too poignant to endure.

"Verne. . . . My Springtime. . . . *All my life.*"

About then it was that the bullying storm gods, as if aggravated to tears that two mortals should rise superior to fear, began to pelt the tortured, quaking earth with torrents of rain.

A cry from Sandyred rang startingly. "Don't go yet, dad—it ain't safe yet!"

But Old Tom Metcalf paid no heed. Down from the sheltered knoll, across the creek and up the opposite mountainside he started, as regardless of the lashing waters and bad going underfoot as of the deluge from above. In his wake, after an order

to the negro to mind the team, hurried his son. Sandy, in turn, was followed by the lovers.

With the shrapnel of hail, the cannonading of the mountain ceased; the landslides gradually slowed, then stopped altogether. When the boulders on the way had followed their vanguard into Roaring Fork, the down-rush was at an end. The comparative quiet, the relief from atmospheric pressure, the refreshment of the rain awoke a sense of exhilaration.

Urgently as the three young people called for a halt of the doughty explorer ahead, hard after as they pressed, they were unable to overtake him. The climb was made more difficult in that all trace of the branch—their former trackless path—was gone. Doubtless it was itself struggling here and yon, under the dead weight of the volcano's spume, to force a way to the mother stream below. Vanished was the rhododendron thicket, the forest of hemlocks, the *chevaux-de-frise* of laurel spikes. Completely covered was the site of the still-house which Parker had demolished in the emergency.

But the patriarch did not pause to note these miracles. Up and up he clambered, past the location of his quondam industry, to what once had been a shelving ledge, now upturned—as it were, inside out. The cabin, whose window frames had been readjusted by a previous disturbance, still stood, although tilted at a rakish angle. Heaps of débris lay all about it, and just above an open wound was slashed across the mountain's face.

Was it that mysterious lard-pail treasure-trove which the old man sought, Parker wondered?

A cry escaped Vernaluska when she saw her parent hurl himself headlong into the cut. Running,

held from stumbling by the two men, she reached the edge, to find him on his knees upon the easy slope within. He was clawing through the shattered rock, was chortling and exclaiming in a demented way.

"Hell's banjer! Richer than I'd ever hoped! No more stiling for Tom, sure enough! Blue flames—mine—all mine!"

"Tommie—hi, Tom!" cried the girl, scrambling after him, her voice apprehensive lest the volcano had disturbed his reason, as well as the mountain-scape.

But the smile with which he rose and turned upon her had calmness in it and reassurance as well as the elation of a life-quest fulfilled.

"You-all don't need to worry over your pappy no more, my girl-child—you nor Sandyred," he said, taking off his battered hat and brushing back his leonine shock of tawny hair. "The Bald, I always calculated, would justify balmy Tom some day. Now she's done gone and done it. Look you-all at this—and this—and this!"

He handed a bit of rock to each. Parker examined his with amazement, rubbed it against his coat, took out the small brooch from his cravat with which to compare it.

"An amethyst of the finer grade," he exclaimed, "bluish-violet, rich in manganese, large—just waiting for the polisher to make it a precious gem!"

"Do you mean, Tom—can you mean that amethysts are the flames you've been searching for all these years? Why didn't you tell us-all?" The questions rushed from Vernaluska.

The rain began to slacken and, drenched though they were, the three listened entranced to Old Tom's

account of the long search for the secret hid in the mountain's heart.

A dispute over the first gem found upon a bar of Roaring Fork it was that had led to a lasting enmity between the elder Metcalf and Dode Currie. Old Tom had picked it up, and Rex's father had claimed it because the bar of its lodgment had been on his side of the creek. Afterward the elder Currie had spent much time searching the Bald for the "mother lode," and had refused all offers Metcalf could make by way of purchase. He had died, however, without reward for his scratching.

"I kept on sifting the creek bars," continued Old Tom, "and found one time and again. At last I came upon a beauty and toted it to a jeweler in Asheville. He got so plumb excited in his offer for it that he obliged me with an idea of what a lode of them might be worth. From him I got a notion of going down into Sapphire County and studying formations there, where gems have been mined for years. But nature didn't give me no helping hand—that not being an amethyst country. After that come times when I nigh lost hope, just as I give up ever buying the Bald offen Rex."

"Queer it should be a mine of amethysts that I have helped the family to recover," Parker commented, "I who need them in my cup more than ever ancient did!"

"But that beauty you found, dad?" reminded Sandyred.

"I never sold it, but give it to Verney. My notion was to preserve her again ever hitching with a drinking man. Then she give it over, so she told me, to preserve one of them ag'in' himself."

The patriarch's eyes twinkled as he noticed Parker replacing the talisman. Exultation threatened his coherency as he bent again over the vein of crystalline quartz uncovered by the split.

"Gad a'mighty, just to think! Scant wonder I couldn't never dig up any of you beauties when you lay abed in solid rock. Once I owned the Bald for good, I was minding to blast out this whole ledge, but I didn't dast leave any one know—not even my boy or gal. Sandy ain't got his tongue under halter, and Verney—well, I couldn't be certain sure, up to late days, that she wa'n't going to graft her secrets onto Rex. If he'd even got an idea—the low-down aspiring hound—he'd never a'sold over the mountain to me, nor Parker, nor none."

His look turned anxious.

"Say, out-Norther, you-all ben't going back on selling us Grumbly Bald now that you know, be you? You wouldn't never have suspicioned the facts but for me."

As Parker assured them that with him a bargain held, the sounds of hard riding came from below, of shouting, of a distinct laugh which all recognized. He broke off to name the disturbance.

"The revenue posse!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

TRUE BLUE

SANDY METCALF confirmed it. "They sure are the law-bringers, with Varmint Currie in the lead! We've got to head 'em away from the still-house until——"

"By God," the old man interrupted, starting after his son, "we-all can't lose out now that we've won! I'll shoot the whole kit-caboodle before I let the spies get evidence on me."

"Wait!" Parker's call halted the down-rushing blockaders. "No need to shoot anybody this afternoon. Let them look for the still-house. They won't find it or the worm either."

"You mean to say, Parkerman, that you——"

Vernaluska seized him by the arm in an agony of hope.

"I mean that you have nothing to fear. Just at the last, after I had done all I could, Judge Grumbly Bald sent out an edict destroying the last bit of evidence."

Her face lifted to his in the rain, now become a drizzle. It seemed to reflect the waxing light from above as she queried, almost afraid to believe:

"The judge—our judge—has acquitted us-all through his court of hills?"

Perhaps she noticed, certainly Parker did, that the sun broke through the clouds in the direction of

Fallaway Rim as they descended to meet the posse.

Rex Currie indeed headed the cavalcade. The two strangers behind him evidently were the "real" revenueurs. Riding just back of them was the doughty sheriff warranted to "get 'em." With the rear guard rode Colonel Dryden, Dr. Prosch, and one who was visibly suffering from the rigors of unwonted equestrianism—that champion "jumper" of molars, Strength-of-the-Lord Plott.

Tugging viciously at his short mustache, Currie stared about him at the havoc which the mountain had wrought upon itself. When the officers looked to him with impatience, he only shook his head. Perforce they set about their own search, but with diminishing ferocity. After the ground had been gone over thoroughly and nothing discovered, there seemed not much for them to say—nothing they could do in the name of the law.

One began to discuss the recent eruption quite pleasantly with him who had been reported as the most reprehensible blockader of both the Carolinas. In preparation for an ignominious retreat, he expanded to an explanation of where he and the rest of the gentlemen out "pleasure riding" had weathered the recent storm.

Bidding Vernaluska stay close to her father and Sandyred, Parker strode across to where Currie stood scowling beside his horse. At his approach, the hillbilly made a movement toward his hip.

"Don't try to draw." The counter-command came bitingly. "I've had you covered these fifteen minutes."

Perhaps then it was that the turncoat noticed where Parker carried the hand of his well arm—in

his right coat-pocket. At any rate, he did not finish his movement toward self-defense.

Although the audience was attentive, none heard the brief exchange.

"I haven't told the Metcalf men the real object behind your plan, Currie, because I don't want them to redden their hands with your blood."

"Don't see as my object is any concern of——"

"But it is. If I hadn't something to live for too worth-while to miss, I'd have it out with you right here. As it is, I'm going to give you one chance at a getaway. Tobe Riker will be waiting for you at the mouth of Roaring Fork at dark to-night. Are you going to keep your appointment with him?"

"Which nor whether, I ain't going to be dictated to by——"

"Oh, yes, you are—by me. Safety first demands that you don't disappoint Tobe in the matter of the twenty-five dollars and one passenger at least. After dark, if you're not gone, have an eye for a smaller posse than the one you led here to-day. It will be after you. Good-by and better luck in the next elopement you plan. No tricks, now! I'll keep your back covered, and, really, I'm not a bad shot at some one I dislike, once I make up my mind to shoot."

The hillbilly's curse was the only fragment the onlookers caught as he began picking his way over the slide. He was followed shortly by as dejected a revenue posse as ever started on a back trip *sans* copper worm or prisoners.

On the short, jolting wagon-ride home, Parker noticed through his utter weariness that a shadow lay on the face of Verne. That through all the

exultation a shadow should rest on her face, other than that cast by the drooping hat of ruined roses, spoiled his joy. Then, all at once, he remembered—he understood.

They had been interrupted by old Tom's start up the mountain in that sweet, vital moment when she had given him her lips. Of course he had been unthinking of her, selfish in his own relief, really unforgivable. The shadow was from those words he still had not said.

He could make no chance to speak until after they had entered the living-room, until Miss Emmy had evolved one conclusion from the garbled tales poured into her ears—to get her recalcitrant invalid back under control without further delay.

But he caught Vernaluska's hand and drew her aside. With pain for what was hurting her deeper than that from his shoulder, he noted her reluctance.

"I know it is no time to stop you—to discuss future plans. We're all soaked to the skin and—and about worn out, I guess." He spoke through white lips and laid a hand on the window frame for support. "But I just can't wait to know. Verne"—he forced himself to speak more briskly—"would you prefer to marry me at once or wait until after I——"

"Why—why——" she stammered, the color that had been so conspicuously absent rushing back to her face.

"Of course no client should try to interpose his own for the judgment of his counsel," he pled, with a wraithlike reminiscence of the Cal Parker smile, "but if you would decide to marry me right

away, dear—if you could take just one more step in your proof of faith in me——”

“Your return to New York? The child woman—what about her?”

“My return is postponed until you go with me. Sylvia—she’s an angel. And the man I persisted in thinking my friend is just a yellow cur. Only wait until I show you the engagement gift they have sent us!”

He pointed to an upside-down picture of a lady in a Gainsborough hat which newly adorned the wall—the only clipping, he explained, upon which Miss Emmy’s hand had “slipped.” Aloud he read from the “gentled-down” text that had come with it, pasted beneath the sill.

The marriage of Miss Sylvia Brainard to Mr. Spencer Pope, deputy collector of United States Internal Revenue, was solemnized at high noon yesterday at the home of the bride’s parents. The ceremony was a surprise, even to immediate friends, as it was hastened by an illness which Mrs. Brainard, mother of the bride, had contracted on a recent trip South. The latter was able, however, to appear at the ceremony, and her speedy recovery is predicted as one of the happy results of the alliance.

Parker straightened from his reading of this news. Something in the look of the fawn-green eyes made him fear that Verne was about to flee again. He caught her hand.

“This was why I couldn’t speak—not until I was free,” he said quickly. “Of course, if you’d rather wait until I’ve shown myself a safe bet as a marriage proposition——”

“You? I reckon you’ve done proved yourself

a-plenty." Words came to her in defense of him against himself. "When the judge roars 'Not guilty!' so that all our world can hear, should your counsel object? Sure enough, Cal, you have been tried by fire."

"The dross is all burnt away," he assured her when he held her close, "by the flame of what I feel for you."

That particular flame of the many in their after-lives proved to be strong, controlled, steady.

And it was blue—true blue.

THE END



